



THE HARLAN ELLISON COLLECTION

*O*VER THE EDGE



Over The Edge

Stories From Somewhere Else

by Harlan Ellison



INTEGRATED MEDIA

NEW YORK

For Bill Rotsler

With wondrous thanks for
thousand of lines, not the
least of which was—

CONTENTS

**FOREWORD: THE FRONTIERS OF EDGEVILLE BY NORMAN
SPINRAD**

INTRODUCTION: BRINKMANSHIP BY HARLAN ELLISON

PENNIES, OFF A DEAD MAN'S EYES

THE END OF THE TIME OF LEINARD

3 FACES OF FEAR: AN ESSAY

BLIND LIGHTNING

WALK THE HIGH STEEL

SHADOW PLAY

THE WORDS IN SPOCK'S MOUTH: AN ESSAY

FROM A GREAT HEIGHT

NIGHT VIGIL

XENOGENESIS: AN ESSAY

ROCK GOD

AH-WEGH THOGHA

ERNEST AND THE MACHINE GOD

FOREWORD: The Frontiers of Edgeville BY NORMAN SPINRAD

Twenty-five years ago, when I wrote the original foreword to the original edition of *OVER THE EDGE*, I began by saying that it “seems to be more or less of a collection of science fiction stories by Harlan Ellison, but it doesn’t wear the categorization very comfortably.”

Twenty-five years on, that is even more true, and not just because the book has been updated and its table of contents somewhat altered.

Twenty-five years on, it is quite clear that *Harlan Ellison* has long seemed to be more or less of a science fiction *writer*, but doesn’t wear the categorization very comfortably, and in retrospect, as this collection of mostly earlier works makes clear, never has.

In fact, the only pieces here that are unequivocally science fiction are “Blind Lightning” and “Night Vigil.” “Pennies, Off a Dead Man’s Eyes,” “Shadow Play,” “Rock God,” and “Ernest and the Machine God” are the sort of contemporary fantasy stories that have long been sloppily classified as science fiction simply because both genres have long been published in the same places under the same logo, SF.

“The End of the Time of Leinard” is a western story. “Walk the High Steel” and “From a Great Height” are pieces of mimetic contemporary fiction. “3 Faces of Fear” is a piece of extended film criticism. “The Words in Spock’s Mouth” is a polemic on writing for television. “Xenogenesis” is a polemic-*cum*-memoir of the author’s (and many others’) bruising life and times with the subculture of science fiction fandom.

The point of classifying the contents of *OVER THE EDGE* being that even twenty-five years ago, the contents of this book reflected rather accurately not only the multiplex aspects of Ellison’s oeuvre at the time, but what was to come.

In point of fact, in terms of its proportionality to the total body of his work, Harlan Ellison has written comparatively little that is really science fiction by any meaningful definition. Nor has his science fiction, with the notable exception of *A Boy and His Dog* (and its separately-published other sections, all parts of the unpublished, but much anticipated long novel, *BLOOD’S A ROVER*), really been his strongest work, or central to his creative core.

Indeed he has probably published more short fiction—like “The End of the Time of Leinard,” “Walk the High Steel,” and “From a

Great Height”—that is not even remotely “speculative” by *any* definition than he has actual science fiction.

As “3 Faces of Fear” and “The Words in Spock’s Mouth” make clear, Ellison has long been involved in film and television as a screenwriter and critic. “Rock God” was written with comic book adaptation in mind, another form Ellison was to become fairly heavily involved in as both creator and critic later on. (He now has his own ongoing comic book, Harlan Ellison’s *Dream Corridor*, published by Dark Horse Comics.)

“Xenogenesis” gives us a primo example of Harlan Ellison the famous polemicist, heir to the sulfuric tradition of Mark Twain, H.L. Mencken and Ambrose Bierce.

All of which is to say that Harlan Ellison from the very beginning was a writer of wide range and scope whose straightforward “science fiction” was only a minor part of his evolving body of work. Nor has that changed at all in the succeeding twenty-five years since the original publication of *OVER THE EDGE*.

Yet to his despair, chagrin, and ire, and despite his mighty polemical efforts to the contrary, Ellison has been and continues to be known as a “science fiction writer.”

Why?

Therein lies a tale.

In my foreword to the original publication of *OVER THE EDGE*, I devoted much attention to the “New Wave” phenomenon of which both Ellison and I were central figures at the time. Much of its relevance to the subject at hand may have faded with the white heat of the cultural war of which it was a part, and therefore bears no repeating here, but some of it remains quite to the point.

“Speculative fiction” was what we were trying to have our New Wave stuff called in those days, first because the term was more inclusive, second because it sounded tonier in the literary salons to which we aspired, and third, to hedge our bets when it came to getting it published, since it could still lay commercial claim to the initials *SF*.

And as I said then, the elusive essential nature of “speculative fiction” is somehow bound up with both the chameleonlike quality of this book and that of the author thereof.

In those days (and even today) the typical “sf” writer wrote “sf” almost exclusively and published most of it in the science fiction specialty magazines and the sf lines of book publishers. Then, and even more so today, Harlan Ellison did not at all fit this profile.

Today, when the same can be said of writers of science fiction or speculative fiction as diverse as J.G. Ballard, Michael Moorcock, Brian

Adliss, Michael Crichton, William Gibson, Ursula K. Le Guin, Kate Wilhelm and yours truly, among many others, we must be reminded that Harlan Ellison was perhaps the first to have “broken out” of the “sf genre” at the very same time he was breaking in.

Back then, I declared that this made Harlan Ellison a “New Wave” writer, but while that is still true, what I said after that would seem to have remained more germane: “Harlan Ellison, in fact, was a ‘New Wave’ speculative writer before there was a ‘New Wave’.”

I linked Ellison to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., William Burroughs, Anthony Burgess, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and J.G. Ballard, all of whom wrote *some* speculative fiction, but not exclusively, all of whom wrote with absolute literary goals in mind, and all of whom were doing it before 1965, when the New Wave was not even a gleam in Michael Moorcock’s eye.

“The so-called ‘New Wave’ is nothing more esoteric than science fiction undergoing a process of transformation from a commercial genre to one more branch on the family tree of literature,” I wrote then.

Right on! I say to that now.

Nor can I say it any better now than I did then:

“Ellison was the first ‘New Wave’ writer...who had emerged from the old science fiction of fandom, hackwork, and the pulps. Moreover...Ellison had to work the transformation without a roadmap, without a peer group, without reliable literary criticism, perhaps even without any clear picture of what kind of literary genre he was departing from, where he was going, or why he was doing it.”

For a clear contemporary take on what a heroic and ambiguous escape act that really was and still is, read “Xenogenesis” and observe the slobbering seductive sucking sounds of that fannish quagmire in action.

“At a time when most science fiction was written by professional science fiction writers who wrote science fiction almost exclusively, Harlan Ellison was producing science fiction, mystery fiction, mainstream fiction, teleplays, film and music criticism...”

Why then is Harlan Ellison even now still so frequently referred to as a “science fiction writer?”

Well:

“The literary marketplace of the day tended to keep the many facets of Ellison’s work compartmentalized. An important theme of much of Ellison’s mainstream fiction was (and is!) the variety of male-female relationships, a subject which the science fiction markets of the 1950s and early 1960s would not touch with a six foot pole. Similarly, the ‘mainstream’ markets of the 1950s tended to consider any story

with a speculative element 'greasy kid stuff.

"Even in those days, Harlan Ellison was primarily a writer of fiction whose muse led sometimes to fiction with a speculative element and sometimes to fiction without a speculative element....

"But when a speculative element merged in his work with mainstream psychological depth and seriousness of literary purpose: Ellison tended to produce the kind of fiction that would come to be called... 'speculative fiction'."

And *this*, my present self would contend, is the heart of his work.

Though Harlan Ellison has written a few novels, he has never been primarily a novelist. And though he has written hundreds of short stories, and particularly many classics of contemporary fantasy at this length, his natural form seems to be the novella and the novelette, short enough to maintain his compression and drive, long enough to give him scope to develop character, background, and novelistic form.

And while some of his best work has been in the novella and novelette of contemporary mimetic fiction, there has not been that much of it, and Ellison's strongest work has always been his contemporary fantasies at this length, well-represented here by two of his classics, "Pennies, Off a Dead Man's Eyes" and "Ernest and the Machine God."

But while the novelette and the novella are in many ways ideal forms in a literary sense, they are damned difficult to get published. In fact, for the last two or three decades at least, there was only one venue where novelettes and novellas of *any* kind were, and are, regularly published.

You guessed it: the sf specialty magazines and anthologies.

Further, up until at least the middle of the 1960s, *fantasy* was a no-no even *there*. So the only reliable way of getting novellas and novelettes published was to include a speculative element and, if it was fantasy rather than science fiction, gesture hypnotically at the editor and invoke the all-purpose acronym SF.

And *that* is how Harlan Ellison, who has written more mainstream stories than actual science fiction, and who is arguably the best and most prolific author of novellas and novelettes that Anglophone letters has produced, and certainly when it comes to contemporary fantasy, has made a reputation which he is probably *never* going to be able to shake as a "science fiction writer."

And yet, all of the above having been said and the New Wave wars having passed into history, it is still literarily just to say that Harlan Ellison *is* a writer of *speculative* fiction at heart; that just as his

screenplays, criticism, polemics, and mainstream fiction have effected and deepened his contemporary fantasies, so has his permanent speculative state of mind permeated all he has written, “speculative fiction” by taxonomic definition or not.

Paradoxically, it is that very state of mind which has annihilated such Talmudic distinctions, which has broken down the ghetto walls in the mind of a kid from Cleveland who grew up within science fiction fandom, and in the end allowed the positive feedback loops among all the areas of Ellison’s creative interests to make him precisely the writer that he has become.

You can see it happening right here in this book.

“Pennies, Off a Dead Man’s Eyes” is a good example of how Ellison frequently uses a speculative element as a *minor* element in a story whose major focus is elsewhere; here on the relationship among the protagonist, the dead man, and the dead man’s daughter.

It is true that in those days (and even today) many science fiction and fantasy writers used this technique to sell basically non-speculative stories to the genre magazines which were the only markets buying their work.

But just as the Harlan Ellison of the 1950s and 1960s was a forerunner of the sort of writers of speculative fiction of the 1980s and 1990s who are now accustomed to seeing their varied works appear in a variety of publications, so too was he a kind of throw-back to the pulp writers of the 1940s and 1930s, who, presented with a wide variety of magazines publishing a wide variety of fiction, wrote everything from westerns to mysteries to science fiction and beyond.

For while the golden age of the pulps was at least a decade and a half gone by the time Ellison started writing, he nevertheless was publishing a wide variety of fiction all along, science fiction, fantasy, even a western like “The End of the Time of Leinard,” including many straightforward mainstream stories like “Walk the High Steel” and “From a Great Height.”

For the most part, he was publishing his “non-sf not in the mostly vanished pulps, but in the slick men’s magazines, particularly *Knight* and its various sister magazines, with whose editor, Jared Rutter, Ellison had a close creative relationship, and which eagerly published both his speculative fiction like “Ernest and the Machine God” and his straightforward mainstream fiction like “Walk the High Steel.”

The point being that since Ellison didn’t have to inject a minor speculative element into otherwise basically mainstream stories in order to get them published, he must have had his literary reasons for working so often in this mode.

After all, why not? If love could be a minor element in a speculative story, why couldn’t a speculative element be a minor

element in a love story?

But in order to make either such sort of story work, a writer would have to be capable of handling both the speculative and psychological elements. And while there are many writers doing that quite regularly now, they all owe a large literary debt to Harlan Ellison, for much before the middle of the 1960s, such writers were few and far between, to the point where he was almost a lone pioneer.

So too the cyberpunks in at least one aspect, for while Ellison may be one of the least cyber guys around—*still* working on a manual typewriter—the punk aspect derives pretty much from what he was doing as far back as the middle 1950s.

For another thing that Ellison was doing early on, in straight adventure fiction like “Walk the High Steel,” in unclassifiable stories like “From a Great Height” and even in contemporary fantasy like “Ernest and the Machine God,” was bringing (for want of less politically-loaded terms) working-class protagonists and hustlers front and center. And dealing centrally with their actual work and scams.

Which is at least half of what makes cyberpunk cyberpunk.

Which is to say that virtually from the beginning of his career, Ellison was free from the trap of thinking in literary categories. The earlier Ellison demonstrated this by writing a wide range of stories in a wide range of genres, the more mature Ellison by often exhibiting the same range within a *single* story.

Ellison draws freely on speculative and non-speculative elements within any given story. Sometimes the speculative element stands in a corner, as in “Pennies,” sometimes it sets up a human situation which could not exist without it, as in “Ernest and the Machine God,” sometimes it is front and center, as in “Shadow Play” or “Blind Lightning” or “Night Vigil” or “Rock God.” Sometimes it comes in the guise of fantasy, sometimes science fiction.

Frequently, as in “Walk the High Steel” and “From a Great Height,” one may read the whole story in anticipation of its emergence, only to find at the end that it works quite nicely, thank you, without any speculative element at all.

And that is one of the charms of reading any given Ellison story for the first time: you can never anticipate in what direction it will go next; speculative, mimetic, psychological, theological, whatever.

Nor, as “3 Faces of Fear,” “The Words in Spock’s Mouth,” and “Rock God” make clear, is Ellison’s prose fiction the whole of the story.

“3 Faces of Fear” will introduce you to Harlan Ellison’s critical writing, which has encompassed fiction, politics, music, cultural affairs, television, and cinema. Some very good fiction writers are

incapable of writing criticism, just as some very good critics cannot do creative work. Again, a demonstration of Ellison's range.

But more, "3 Faces of Fear" is neither academic criticism nor "popular" film reviewing; this is criticism that only an active practitioner of fiction could produce. For in his critical writing, Ellison utilizes all the methods of the fiction writer: evoking memories, visualizing scenes, recounting anecdotes, appealing to the senses. This is why you will enjoy reading it even if you have no interest in cinema, no interest in criticism, and no interest in the anatomy of fear.

It will also remind you, and "The Words in Spock's Mouth" even more so, that Ellison's work is not confined to the printed page, that he has followed a parallel career in screen writing all along, and that, unlike so many craftsmanlike practitioners of the screenwriter's trade, he has brought his passions and serious intent with him.

Even something like "Rock God," admittedly not Ellison at the top of his short story form, reveals in its genesis and execution how Ellison's various aspects as a creator synergize with each other in a positive sense.

"Rock God" was written with comic book adaptation in mind (Ellison has since written quite a bit directly for this form) and therefore suffers to some extent from a lack of psychological depth. But in the first half of the story, Ellison deals with this problem nicely by giving us the events as if he were writing a screenplay treatment. This enables him to engrave the larger-than-life mythic image of the Rock God on the Reader's mind using the visual techniques of film and comic book art in order to use that image *as a mythic image* in the second half of the story.

A modest literary goal, maybe, but a clear demonstration in formal terms of Harlan Ellison's trans-categorical vision.

Ellison doesn't see the techniques of the story writer or the critic or the polemicist or the comic book scenarist or the screenwriter as separate kits of literary tools any more than he sees thematic material, settings, character, or for that matter the laws of physics, as defining separate genres of fiction.

He writes down the stuff inside his head, using whatever palette of effects borrowed from whatever literary sphere seems appropriate at the time.

And like most of us, the inside of his head is like something thought up by Dali, who himself seemed to have laid down on canvas his vision of the moment with complete disregard for categories.

In this ultimate sense, if one must categorize Harlan Ellison, then call him a literary surrealist.

Which is why, though he is not a science fiction writer, he still

cannot help but involve himself in the lives and times of those who are, and bear passionate witness thereto in an anguished screed like “Xenogenesis.”

For in the ultimate sense, surrealism is indeed the state of the spirit that the fans call “sense of wonder” and that all who write science fiction and fantasy share in one degree or another or they wouldn’t be following even the narrowest version of such a speculative path.

Which is why Harlan Ellison, no science fiction writer, is a writer of *speculative* fiction in his heart of hearts.

—Norman Spinrad Paris, France

INTRODUCTION: Brinksmanship

It is February of 1996 as I sit here writing these words. More than twenty-five years since OVER THE EDGE was first published as a crummy little 75¢ paperback original from a company called Belmont. It was printed on something like woody, pulpy blotting-paper, and the best things about it were the gorgeous cover painted by my old friends, the Caldecott Award winners, Leo & Diane Dillon, and a generously laudatory foreword by the excellent novelist and social critic, Norman Spinrad.

The book contained eleven stories and one essay.

About 60,000 words of material.

It was my nineteenth or twentieth published book. May of 1970. I had just turned 36. OVER THE EDGE made virtually no splash. It was read, seemed to have a pleasant effect on more or less eighteen thousand people (which is how many copies it sold at the time), and vanished. I never let the book be reprinted. Not because the stories weren't good enough to have an ongoing existence, but because I had other fields to plow, and, well, as the cliché would have it, I'd been there, done that.

In the intervening years, *because* some of those eleven stories were ones for which I retained pride and affection, I used them in other collections of my work. Collections that contained more current, better-crafted stories. And yet, the selections I cadged from OVER THE EDGE fit right in. They were better than just okay. They were stories that were still able to sing their song, and they fit right in.

But the entire book lived in shadow and memory. It never got around to being reprinted when one or another publisher would commit to doing a long series of reprints. Two or three times since 1970, major programs of multi-volume publication; but OVER THE EDGE just didn't get re-done.

This is the first new edition of OVER THE EDGE in more than a quarter of a century. And there has been some facelift, a bit of tuck&roll, a fresh coat of Mar-TeX and the carbs have been flushed. Also new rims and header.

Of the original eleven stories (the original lone essay has been retained, and two new ones, never before collected, have been added), six have been excised and four previously-uncollected stories have

been added. Six pieces are gone, and six new ones have been ushered in as replacements. The book is now something like 80,000 words long, more substantial than in its first appearance.

(Oh, by the way, don't fret. Those six deleted stories are in other books that will appear in White Wolf volumes as the next few years see this publication program continue. But for your peace of mind, here's the list of stories I've removed, and the upcoming books in which they will appear: "Final Trophy," "!!!The!!Teddy!!Crazy!!Show!!!," "Tiny Ally" and "Blank..." will come to you in *STALKING THE NIGHTMARE*, my 1982 collection; "The Prowler in the City at the Edge of the World," my Jack the Ripper story, is one of the collaborations in *PARTNERS IN WONDER*, from 1971; and "Enter the Fanatic, Stage Center" returns to its first home, *GENTLEMAN JUNKIE And Other Stories of the Hung-Up Generation*, from which it was pilfered to appear in the Belmont book.)

If you wonder why I've gutted *OVER THE EDGE* and installed some bright, shiny, new material that's never been included in any of my sixty-something books, the answer is a touchstone to my attitude about my liaison with those who read my work. And the answer is this:

Quite a few years ago, before I knew better, I shifted and shuffled stories from book to book, to get the right mix. But one day I read a review of my latest tome by some young critic whose name I've long-since lost, a review that whacked me upside the head. He said that it was dismaying how many books currently available included stories that were in other collections by the same authors. And I thought, yeah, what a gyp.

You see, the motivation for re-using stories was neither venal nor merely expedient. It wasn't that I didn't have enough new material to go around (with more than 1700 stories published that was never a problem), and it sure as hell wasn't laziness. It was one of those rare manifestations of genuine humility on my part. As those who know me well will attest, I do humility really badly.

But my thinking, born out of an uncommon humility, was that no one was so devoted to my writings that s/he would have *all* the books, and thus would likely never have seen stories from older collections that were no longer in print. So I'd grab up a story here and there, not too often, but now and then. And there were duplications over the years.

Well, when I read that criticism, I resolved to eliminate all duplications when earlier books came back into print, and not to let that onerous practice happen again. (I have kept that resolve for almost twenty years. But I do hope the astute reader will exclude the

35-year retrospective THE ESSENTIAL ELLISON, from Morpheus International, that is almost entirely composed of previously-published work. That's why it's called a *retrospective*, stupid.)

So here comes OVER THE EDGE again, more than two decades later, and I've excised the dupes, and added longer, newer, never-before-collected pieces, and this is a new introduction.

You may ask why I didn't reprint the *original* version of "Brinksmanship" in this spiffy new package. Well, er, uh, I was going to do just that...reprint the old introduction...and add a few short remarks just to deal with the fresh material in the book...but then I made the mistake of reading the stupid thing. Jeezus, it blew. Massively. A hocker of auctorial phlegm. And since I have this systemic aversion to aiding and abetting myself in public humiliation, I decided to shit-can the thing.

Don't frown. You'd've hated it.

What you *won't* hate is Norman Spinrad's lovely new version of his original Foreword. Norman lives in Paris now, and he got married a couple of years ago—we all thought it an impossibility that a woman existed who could either snare or mollify the wild man—and he has written many controversial and memorable books since he was pal enough to front OVER THE EDGE's initial release, but as a writer he has only grown and gotten more muscular; and he has remained a staunch friend. I am in his debt for "The Frontiers of Edgeville."

And here are a few side-bars to the stories.

PENNIES, OFF A DEAD MAN'S EYES: was a title I had sitting around for years before I figured out the story to go with it. I had written the scene in the funeral parlor completely, had *that* part down cold, but ground to a halt thereafter; just couldn't figure out where to go with it. So I put it aside for, oh, maybe two, three years. And then one day in 1970 I was sitting in that tiny space I called an office, in the treehouse I lived in, up the now-vanished Bushrod Lane, in Los Angeles, and I was working on a tv script—I think it was a *Mod Squad* teleplay, because I'd met Peggy Lipton on a plane flight to the East Coast, and we'd gotten to know each other, and I was single, and she was beautiful and had just been on the cover of *Life*, and—uh, that's another story—and I seem to have wandered—and suddenly, right in the middle of this killer deadline crush, the studio screaming for the pages so they could start pre-production, I flashed on the scene of someone copping the dollars off a dead guy's eyes, the scene I'd written years before, and I suddenly knew how to write the story, knew instantly and without any conscious imperative that the story was not a straight, mimetic, contemporary drama, but a straight, mimetic, contemporary *fantasy* with a social relevance that was buried

in the fantasy element, that paralleled it. And I ripped the page of teleplay out of my typewriter, suicidally ignoring the phone calls that had been coming every hour or so from the studio...and I dug like a gopher through the file drawer of snippets and pastiches and unfinished texts and ideas on restaurant placemats, until I found what I'd written years earlier. And I went right back at it, clear as spring water, knowing *precisely* what I had to do. Now here's the kicker: when I sent the story in to one of the science fiction magazines for which I was writing in those days, the editor bounced it. He said it wasn't sf, neither was it a fantasy. I was dumbfounded. In the story, there is a phrase: "to go dark." It means to turn oneself invisible, or at least to render oneself so unobtrusive that no one can see you, and so, in effect, one is invisible. That element alone would bring the story into the genre. But there is an even greater, *more purely* fantasy element in the story—which I'll not reveal and spoil your pleasure at discovering it—which should certainly have resonated with that editor's editorial needs. But he wasn't one of the editors who would soon thereafter populate the field who were open to experimental writing. "Pennies" sold to the very next editor, the now-passed Ejler Jakobsson, a very fine man, who thought it was a terrific story (so did I, he said dimpling prettily) and who put it on the front cover of that issue of *Galaxy*, I reread that story every once in a while, and I'm glad it's back in print; because I am extremely proud of it. And if you aren't familiar with the concept of "passing" it is probably because you are a White Person, and maybe you ought to stop the nearest Black Person over the age of, say, thirty, when next you pass one on the street, and ask him or her what "passing" means. This has been an educational service of the Ellison Sociological Seminary.

ERNEST AND THE MACHINE GOD: was one of the original stories in my examination of Gods for Our Times that led, in 1975, to my assembling the cycle of works titled DEATHBIRD STORIES. Some critics say that book is my best. Maybe. I don't think so, but what the hell do I know? Anyway, the interesting sidelight to "Ernest" is that it really happened. To me. If you change the woman in the story—who is a lot meaner than I am, not to mention made up from bits and pieces of several wives of friends of mine—to Harlan Ellison, and you change the locale to North Carolina in the 1960s, you will understand why this story always creeps me out. I met the real kid who is Ernest in this fable. Met the rest of those guys sitting on the porch, too. I was *this close* to Ernest when he did to my car what Ernest in the story does to the woman's car. I *saw* it happen, folks. He was an eerie kid. Sweet, and innocent, and scared the shit outta me. As those who read my work closely will attest, I am a pragmatic sonofabitch. Don't

believe in reincarnation, flying saucers, astrology, ghosts, ESP. But I saw Ernest talk to a car, and if psi powers don't exist, as I believe, then that hillbilly kid was some weird sort of idiot savant. This is the other story of this collection that I'm most pleased with. It holds up real fat over the years.

THE END OF THE TIME OF LEINARD: is one of the new pieces I introduced here to replace a story that was pulled. In the old days, when I first went to New York to write professionally, it was the last gasp dying moments of the pulp magazine era, and most houses had converted their titles to digest-size magazines. Over at Columbia Publications, "Doc" Lowndes has a few western books still going. In those days, they were big sellers to, of all people, cowboys. Ranch hands and folks out in the open spaces used to read the magazines regularly. Don't ask me why. But when you were being paid only 1/2¢ a word, you wrote *everything*. And I wrote a couple, three, four westerns. This one is my favorite. I like this story a bunch; it is told in the style of the western films I admire most, those identified with the directors Sergio Leone and Anthony Mann. Never bought into that idealized "noble gunslinger" icon in most John Wayne flicks, or the later John Ford epics. Sam Peckinpah held my adoration. *Warlock; Duck, You Sucker!*; and one of the finest films of the last decade, *Unforgiven*, with that sensational David Webb Peoples screenplay that Eastwood rips off credit for having "interpreted." One other thing about this story. It was adapted into graphic format for my comic book, *Harlan Ellisons Dream Corridor*, by the great visual artist Doug Wildey. It was Doug's last job before he died a couple of years ago. He was a terrific man, a wonderful interpreter of times gone by, and a bunch of us miss the hell out of him. I thought I'd tell you that. If your friends don't keep reminding the Uncaring Universe that you were here, who will? Friendship doesn't end its responsibilities just because something shitty like Death gets in the way.

ROCK GOD: was written to illustrate a moody Frank Frazetta cover on an issue of the now-defunct Warren Publications *Creepy*. It was visually adapted from the short story version by the legendary Neal Adams. It appeared in narrative form simultaneously in a little-known digest magazine called *Coven 13*. Part of my deal with Warren was that I would be able to buy the original art from "Rock God" from Neal Adams. Well, Mr. Warren was somewhat less than honorable—the word *slippery* leaps to mind unbidden—and the art mysteriously "vanished" soon after publication. It was not till ten years later that I had one of my most interesting hardboiled *noir* experiences, late at night in Manhattan, with an incognito trafficker in goods, during which encounter I finally laid hands on, and finally came into possession of, the missing originals. When we get together some

evening, ask me to tell you that story. It's a beaut. Simply a little bewty.

FROM A GREAT HEIGHT: is both an old and a new story. I wrote it once, way back in the mid-Sixties, for a men's adventure magazine, one of those "Weasels Ripped My Flesh!!!" books that featured hardboiled stories and bogus action-adventure tales allegedly written by outdoorsmen who had gone one-on-one with hammerhead sharks or rabid rhinos. Got paid the staggering sum of \$200 from *True Men*, which was a big payday in those days. I recently pulled the yarn out of the drawer—it's never been reprinted—and rewrote it as an homage to Jim Thompson, James M. Cain, Chandler Brossard...that whole crowd of tough writers whose work inspired me so much when I was learning my craft. Gave it a new title, in its expanded incarnation, and it appears here in book-form for the first time.

XENOGENESIS: is the longest essay I ever wrote. It's been reprinted a half dozen times in various periodicals since its initial appearance a few years ago, but appears in book-form here for the first time. It took me years and years to complete. It may be the most controversial essay I've ever written that deals with the relationship of the reader to the writer. It has a weird effect on people. There are jerks who are perseverant nuisances, pains in the ass, schmucks who never notice that no one laughs at their idiot puns but themselves, the human equivalent of a bad cold, an infarct, a flatulence...those who are eristic to the point where your only thought is of violence...and it is these soiled festoons of ambulatory bumfodder who read "Xenogenesis" and get mightily pissed off. They do so, please take note, because *they see themselves in the depictions*. If there is an entry in this book that is truly "over the edge," it is surely this one.

The other stories and essays speak for themselves. They do the jobs they were created to do, and I offer them to you again, after all these years, without qualm.

The cubic gallons that have poured over the dam since this book was first published could fill Poseidon's Jacuzzi. Lives have been led, friends have died, entire publishing companies have sunk beneath the waves like the last shimmering towers of drowned Atlantis. I'm the same guy, yet several different guys. What was, what seemed immutable, has worn away to dust and been blown off on the trade winds. Most of you discovering me for the first time will be surprised to learn that I've been around a while.

And intend to be around quite some time longer.

Had this interesting encounter with Fate a while back. Shot some back-alley craps with him. He lost. I'll be around a *long* time. Imagine how dearly that news is greeted by those who can't stand my

existence. Ain't life grand, here on the edge?

PENNIES, OFF A DEAD MAN'S EYES

It was a slow freight in from Kansas City. I'd nearly emptied all the fluid from my gut sac. There were no weeds or water to fill it again. When the freight hit the outermost switching lines of the yards it was already dark. I rolled myself off the edge of the boxcar, hit running, went twenty feet fast and slipped, fell to my hands and knees, and tumbled over. When I got up there were tiny bits of white chalk stone imbedded in my palms; I rubbed them off, but they really hurt.

I looked around, tried to gauge my position in relation to the town, and when I recognized the spire of the First Baptist, set off across the tracks in the right direction. There was a yard bull running like crazy toward me, so I went dark and left him standing where I'd been, scratching the back of his head and looking around.

It took me forty minutes to walk into the center of town, through it, and out the other side, in the direction of Littletown—the nigger section.

There was a coal bin entrance to the All-Holiness Pentecostal Church of Christ the Master, and I slipped inside, smiling. In twelve years they hadn't repaired the latch and lock. The stairs were dim in the basement darkness, but I knew my way the way a child remembers his bedroom when the light is out. Across twelve years, I remembered.

There were the occasional dim rumblings of voices from upstairs, from the vestry, from the casket room, from the foyer.

Jedediah Parkman was laid out up there. Eighty-two years old, dead, tired, at the end of an endless road down which he had stumbled, black, poor, proud, helpless. No, not helpless.

I climbed the stairs from the basement, laid my white hand against the dry, cracked wood of the door, and thought of all the weight of black pressing back on the other side. Jed would have chuckled.

Through a crack in the jamb I saw nothing but wall opposite; I carefully opened the door. The hall was empty. They'd be moving into the vestry now. The service would be beginning. The preacher would be getting ready to tell the congregation about old Jed, what a good man he'd been, how he always had enough heart for the stray cats and deadbeat kids he picked up. How so many people owed him so much. Jed would have snorted.

But I'd arrived in time. How many other stray cats had made it?

I closed the basement door behind me, slid along the wall to the pantry door that opened into the small room adjacent to the vestry. In a moment I was inside. I turned off the light in the pantry, in case I had to go dark, then I crept to the door in the opposite wall. I opened it a sliver and peered out into the vestry.

Since the bombing the chapel had been unusable. I'd heard about it even in Chicago: seven had been killed, and Deacon Wilkie'd been blinded by flying glass. They'd made do the best they could with the vestry.

Folding chairs were set up in rows. They were filled with the population of Littletown. They were two deep around the walls. One or two white faces. I recognized a couple of other stray cats. It'd been twelve years: they looked as though they were making it. But they hadn't forgotten.

I watched, and counted blacks. One hundred and eighteen. A few days ago, I'd been in Kansas City, there'd been one hundred and nineteen. Now the one hundred and nineteenth black man in Danville's Littletown lay in his casket, atop sawhorses, in the front of the room, surrounded by flowers.

Hello, old Jed.

Twelve, it's been.

God, you're quiet. No chuckles, no laughs, Jed. You're dead. I know.

He lay, hands folded across his chest. Big catcher's mitt paws folded, calluses hidden—sweet Jesus, I could see flickering candlelight glinting off his nails. *They'd manicured his hands!* Old Jed would've screamed, doing a thing like that to a man bit his nails to the quick!

Laying up in a shallow box, neat black patent leather shoes pointing toward the ceiling; kinky salt-and-pepper hair flattened against the silk lining of the box (eighty-two, and that old man's hair still had black in it!); lay in his best suit, a black suit, clean white long-sleeve shirt and a yellow tie. On display. Looking down at himself, for sure, from the Heaven he'd always believed was up there. Looking down at himself so fine, and smiling; puffing proud, yes *sir!*

On each of his eyes, a silver dollar.

To pay his way with the Man, across the River Jordan.

I didn't go in. Never intended to. Too many questions. Some of them might've remembered; I know the other stray cats would've. So I just laid back and waited to talk to old Jed private.

The service was a brief one, they cried a decent amount. Then it was over and they filed past slowly. A couple of women did the big falling down trying to get in the box thing with him. Christ knows

what Jed would've done with *that*. I waited till the room emptied out. Preacher and a couple of the brothers cleaned up, decided to leave the chairs till morning, shut off the lights, and went. There was silence and a lot of shadows, just the candles still doing their slow motion. I waited a long time, just to make sure, then finally I opened the door a bit more and started to step through.

There was a sound from the door to the outside, and I pulled back fast. I watched as the door opened and a tall, slim woman in black came down among the chairs toward the open casket. Veil over her face.

My gut sac went total empty right then. Lining started to burn. I thought sure she'd hear the rumbling. Sprayed it with stomach juice and that would hold it for a while till I could get weed and water. Burned.

I couldn't make out her face behind the veil. She walked up to the casket and stared down at Jed Parkman. Then she reached out a gloved hand toward the body, pulled it back, tried again and then held the hand motionless in the air above the cold meat. Slowly she swept the veil back over the wide-brimmed hat.

I drew in a breath. She was a white woman. More than just ordinarily beautiful. Stunning. One of those creatures God made just to be looked at. I held my breath; breathing would release the sound of the blood in my temples, scare her away.

She kept looking at the corpse, then slowly she reached out again. Carefully, very carefully, she removed the coins from Jed's dead eyes. She dropped them in her purse. Then she dropped the veil, and started to turn away. She stopped, turned back, kissed her fingertips and touched the cold lips of the penniless dead one.

Then she turned around and left the vestry. Very quickly.

I stood unmoving, watching nothing, chill and lost.

When you take the money off a dead man's eyes, it means he can't pay his passage to Heaven.

That white woman sent Jedediah Parkman straight to Hell.

I went after her.

If I hadn't keeled over, I'd have caught her before she got on the train.

She wasn't far ahead of me, but my gut was burning so bad I knew if I didn't get some grass or weeds in it I'd be in wicked shape. That happened once in Seattle. I barely got out of the emergency ward before they could X-ray me. Broke into the hospital kitchen, pumped about eight pounds of Caesar salad and half a bottle of Sparkletts water into my sac and wound up bareass cold in a hospital gown, out

on a Seattle street in the dead of winter.

Hadn't thought that for a second before I went over on my face, half a block from the Danville train station. Legs went idiot on me and over I go. Had just enough sense to go dark before I hit. Lay there, a car might run me over. No idea how long I was out, but not long. Came back and crawled on my belly like a reptile onto a patch of grass. Chewed, pulling myself on my elbows. Got enough in to get myself up, staggered the half block to the station, fell onto the water fountain stuck on the wall. Drank till the stationmaster leaned way over the ticket window, staring. Couldn't go dark, he was looking straight at me.

"You got business here, mister?"

I felt the lava juices subsiding. I could walk. Went up to him, said, "My fiancée, you know, a bad fight, she come down this way..." I let it wait. He watched me, wasn't giving away a little thing free.

"Look, we're supposed to be married next Thursday—I'm sorry I yelled at her. Half out of my, well, hell, mister, have you seen her? Tall girl, all in black, wearing a veil?" Sounded like a description of Mata Hari.

Old man scratched at the beard he'd sprouted since he'd come on at noon. "She bought a ticket for KayCee. Train's 'bout to pull out."

Then I realized I'd been hearing the whoofing sounds of the train all this time. When my sac goes, everything goes. I started hearing and smelling and feeling the grain of the ticket counter under my hands. And bolted out the door. Train was just getting ready to slide; express freight was almost loaded. Behind me, the station master was bellowing. "Ticket! Hey, mister...ticket!"

"Get it by the conductor!" And I vaulted up onto the coach platform. The train edged out.

I pushed open the door to the coach and looked down the rows of Pullman seats. She was there, looking out the window into the darkness. I started toward her, but thought better of it. There were a couple of dozen passengers between her and me. I couldn't do anything here, now, anyway. I dropped into a scungy seat, and puffs of dust went into the air.

I slid down and took off my right shoe. The twenty was folded neat against the instep. It was all I'd put aside. But I knew the conductor would be along to punch my ticket. And I didn't want to get caught like Jed Parkman. I wanted my fare to be paid.

We'd see about it in Kansas City.

It was a change. Riding inside.

She went to a phone booth and dialed a place without looking up the number. I waited. She went out to stand in front of the terminal. After a while a car with two women came up, and she got in. I went dark and opened the back door and slid in. They looked around and didn't see anything in the shadows back there; and the heavyset woman, a real truck, who was driving, said, "Now what the hell was *that*?" and the pimply one with the plastic hair, the one in the middle, reached over the seat back and thumbed down the lock.

"Wind," she said.

"*What* wind?" the truck said. But she pulled out.

I always liked K.C. Nice ride. Even in winter. But I didn't like the women. Not one of them.

They drove out, almost to the Missouri border, toward Weston. I knew a bourbon distillery out there. Best ever made. The truck pulled in at a big house set apart from slummy-looking places on a street with only one corner light. Whore house. Had to be. It was.

I didn't understand, but I'd by God certainly find out soon. I'd arrived, but Jed was still traveling.

The truck said, "You pay the girl."

I picked out the tall slim one in the harem pants and halter top. She couldn't be smart, I thought. With a face like that, when her sand wasn't nearly run out yet, to come to rest in a slurry crib like this, was some kind of special stupid. Or something else.

We went upstairs. The room was like any bedroom. There were stuffed animals on the bed, a giraffe with pink day-glo spots, a koala, floppy gopher or muskrat, I can't tell them apart. She had a photo of a movie star stuck in the frame of the bureau mirror. She took off the harem pants and I said, "We'll talk." She gave me a look I knew. Another freako. "That's two bucks extra," she said. I shook my head. "Five should cover everything."

She shrugged, and sat down on the edge of the bed, her thin legs straight out in front of her.

We stared at each other.

"Why'd you send Jed to Hell?"

Her head snapped up on her neck and she quivered like a hound on scent. She didn't even know how to ask me.

"You get the hell out of here!"

"I've got five bucks' worth of something coming."

She bounced up off that bed, and went straight across the room. She was screaming before the door was open:

"Bren! Bren! C'mon, Bren! Help up here!"

I heard the foundations of the house shake and the rumble of

artillery on the next hill, and then something big and hairy came at me. He had to come through the door sidewise. I put up my hands and that was all. He carried me straight across the room, into the bureau. My back snapped against the edge of the bureau and he bent me till everything started to slip up toward the ceiling. The girl ran out, still shouting. When she was gone I ended it for him.

There was a trellis outside the window. I went down until the ivy ripped loose and I fell the rest of the way.

That night I slept on the front porch of the house next door, in the glider, watching the ambulance and then the police cars come and go. There were two unmarked police cars that stayed very late. I don't think they were on duty.

I waited two days, sleeping on the front porch of the house next door. I'd have gone dark more than I did, but there were three empty lots between me and the whore house, and the people with the front porch had gone away for a while. I suppose on a winter vacation, maybe. There was plenty of weed and grass around, and I let snow melt in an empty milk bottle. At night I'd go dark and steal Hydrox Cookies and milk and beef jerky from a 24-hour market. I don't eat much, usually. Missed coffee, though.

On the second day I jimmied a window in the empty house. Just to be ready.

Toward evening of the second day, she came out.

I went dark, waited on the sidewalk for her, and she walked straight into my fist.

In the empty house, I laid her out on a canopied bed in the master bedroom. When she came to and sat up, I was slouched in a chair across from the bed. She shook her head, looked around, focused, saw me, and started to let go with the screaming again. I sat forward in the chair and said, very softly, "Bren, what happened to him, I can do that again," and she looked sick, and shut her mouth. "Now we go back to where we were," I said, getting up. I walked over and stood there near her. She lay back, terrified, no other word for it.

"How did you know Jed?" My voice was level, but I was hurting.

"I'm his daughter."

"I can make you tell the truth."

"I'm not lying, I'm his...I was his daughter."

"You're white."

She didn't say anything.

"Okay, why did you send him to Hell? You know what it means to take the money."

She snorted a very shitty laugh.

“Lady, you better understand something. I don’t know who the hell you are, but that old man found me when I was seven years old and kept me alive till I was old enough to go it on my own. Now he meant stuff to me, lady, so I can see myself getting mad enough at you to do just about *anything*. More green than even Bren. So you feel like telling me why you’d do something like that to a man who was kind to everybody?”

Her face went very hard. Even scared, she hated. “And just what the hell do *you* know? Yeah, he had kind for everybody. Everybody ’cept his own.” Then, softly, “Everybody ’cept me.”

I couldn’t tell if she was sick, or deluded, or just putting me on. Lying? Not where she was. No reason for it. And she’d seen that Bren. No, she was telling the truth—if she believed it.

A white girl with old Jed for a father.

It didn’t make any sense.

Unless...

There are some you can meet—the strange, twisted ones—and you know them by an aura, a scent, a *feel* about them, that if you had one *single word*—like “junkie” or “nympho” or “hooker” or “Bircher”—a key word that labeled their secret thing, you would understand all the inexplicable off-center things about them. The one-word people. One word and you’ve got the handle on them. One word like wino, or diabetic, or puritan, or—

“Passing.”

She didn’t answer. She just stared at me, and hated me. And I looked in her face to see it, now that I knew what it was, but it wasn’t there, of course. She was good at it. And that explained what had been between her and old Jedediah Parkman. Why she’d kissed the dead meat and sent it straight to Hell. But not the kind of Hell Jed had consigned her to. If he’d had all that kind of love for stray cats like me, I could imagine how strong his hate and frustration and shame would have been at one of his own pretending to be what she wasn’t.

“You never know about people,” I said to her. “He took in all kinds, and didn’t care where they came from, or what they were. Just as long as they didn’t lie about it. He had a lot of love.”

She was waiting for me to do something bad to her, what she thought she had coming. I laughed, but not the way Jed used to laugh. “Lady, I ain’t your daddy. He’s punished you all he’s ever going to. And you and me, neither one of us is white, and we’re too much alike for *me* to punish you.”

Passing. How about that. She didn’t know what the color line even *looked* like. Black for white: hell, that’s a cinch. Jed, Jed, you poor old

nigger bastard. You knew I couldn't get home again, back to whatever world it was I'd come from, and you taught me how to pass so they wouldn't kill me, but you couldn't handle it when it happened to you.

I pulled my last five bucks out of my pocket and tossed it on the end of the bed. "Here, baby, get it changed and keep a couple of silver dollars for your own party. Maybe Jed'll be waiting and you can straighten it out between you."

Then I went dark and started to leave. She was staring at where I'd been, her mouth open, as I paused in the doorway. "And keep the change," I said.

After all, she'd paid the dues for me, hadn't she?

THE END OF THE TIME OF LEINARD

Sheriff Frank Leinard felt the creeping cold of the grave—his or the old man’s—riming his body. Every inch of his skin; but not the flesh of his right hand. He stood ready, right hand warm and loose, poised in limbo above the gun. His belly was drawn in tightly, his legs well-planted, body half-turned to present the narrowest target.

“I don’t want to draw on you, Gus...don’t make me,” he said softly. But his voice carried down the street to the old man.

The breeze coming in from the west end of town ruffled his lank brown hair. The breeze whispered of holy rain for which the town had hoped, and it bore the metallic scent of the *barranca*, miles away. The breeze also stirred the shirttail hanging from Gus Tabbert’s pants. The flap of cotton shirting over the old man’s holster.

Tabbert swayed. It was obvious he was drunk. “N I ain’t *gonna* make ya draw, Sher’f. But you ain’t gonna take me t’no jail, neither...”

The Sheriff’s hard, square face grew even tighter. “We don’t *like* drunks that make noise and shoot up the Palace, Gus. You know that. Now just settle back and don’t make me draw on you.”

There was a staggering movement from Tabbert, and he fumbled awkwardly past the shirttail, trying to get his fingers around the old, heavy Colt Walker.

Frank Leinard’s right hand became invisible for an instant, and reappeared with the big Colt Army .44 free of the holster; and the August peace of the town was shattered by two sharp, quick reports, like a bull-whip snick-snickering.

Gus Tabbert took a tentative step, felt at himself, and twisted forward, face-first into the dust. He was dead before he hit. He lay there with the revolver halfway out of its holster, his legs crushed up under him.

The breeze ruffled his gray hair.

“Look, Frank, you gotta understand somethin’.”

Pete Redallo, who ran the livery, and was also the spokesman for the City Council—what there was of it—stood with his sweat-stained hat in his hand. He stood before Frank Leinard’s desk in the Sheriff’s office with three of his fellow councillors. He had come to ask Frank

Leinard to resign.

"You gotta know Bartisville ain't the same as it used to be. Things is changed, Frank."

Leinard was a big, rangy man, with small, deep-set eyes of black and a full, gray-flecked mustache. He wore heavy lumberjack shirts and no vest, and he sweated a great deal: there were always two heavy, dark semicircles under his armpits. He wore the .44 low on the right side, with the concho thongs tied down on his thigh. There was a quiet competence about him, a strength, an assertiveness. He was the kind of man youngsters followed around with knives and whittle-sticks, begging for a little attention. He was the Sheriff, bred in the bone, anywhichway you looked at him, awake or on the nod.

His voice was soft, but never wheedling. Stronger than ever now, as he said, "How do you mean, Pete? Changed?"

Redallo twisted the hat. He looked to his friends for aid. They nudged him with their eyes, to continue.

"Well, like this, Frank. Ya see, before, when Bartisville was just gettin' started, when we was the end of the trail drive for everybody in this territory, we was a pretty wild town. Now we ain't belittlin' what you done here; you made this a decent town for our wives and kids, Frank."

"But you got to understand something, Frank," Morn Ashley said, with that sweet voice of his. "You gotta understand that those days are behind us. Hell, Frank, it's comin' up on the Turn of the Century. New times! New ways of doin' things diff'rent from before. Why, I can run the bridge across the Shawsack without no trouble't'all nowadays. Used to be that I'd have to drop down every man thought he could pass without payin' my toll. But things is calmed down quite a lot, and there ain't no call for all the gunslingin' you do."

"Like I was sayin', Frank," Pete Redallo continued, asserting his position as spokesman with slight belligerence, "this was a wild town, and you came down from Kansas, and cleaned it up. Now we ain't belittlin' you at all. It was what we hadda have done, and you done it. We're mighty grateful for that. But, well, we, uh—"

"What're you tryin' to say, Pete?" Frank asked. His gaze was steady, without guile.

"Well, uh, well, there was just no call to shoot up poor old Gus Tabbert that way."

"He was drunk and disorderly. He drew on me."

Redallo dropped the hat, a flush hitting his cheekbones. "You know Gus was *always* drunk, Frank. And the little bit of shootin' he did was nothin' compared to what used to happen when Con Farlow's boys used to hit town. Tabbert oughtn't to be dead. It's just not right,

is all."

Morn Ashley moved up beside Redallo.

"Look, Frank, I'll be honest 'bout this.

"You've gotten to be more than just Sheriff 'round here. The way some folks feel, you're the law entire. The mayor, and the Council, and whatall. And that ain't right, Frank. This is as much your town as ours, but you don't act the way we figger a Sheriff should, no more.

"We're lots quieter now. The frontier days are gone, Frank. When you had to draw on every man who shot up a saloon, that was another time...what was right then, it just don't seem proper now. Hell, Frank, old Tabbert was a friend to all of us—"

"Gus was *my* friend, too, Morn," Leinard said, softly.

"That's what we're tryin' to say, Frank." It was Karl Breslin from the B-slash-D speaking for the first time. "When you had plenty of rowdy-dowdys to tame, you were in fine style; but now that it's mostly families and such in Bartisville, you've taken to huntin' yore meat in the townsfolk. We just want you to understand that times change, and the men gotta change with 'em, otherwise—"

Leinard stood up slowly. He was a big man, well over six feet, graying but fit, and they edged back warily. There was no telling what burned beneath that calm surface. The way he always spoke so soft and warm. Leinard put his hands out—fingers spread, palms flat—on the desk. His face was calm, as he answered them.

"What you're tryin' to say is, you want me to resign. That right, Pete, Morn, Karl, Anse? That it?"

They stumbled and stammered and mumbled. "Well, no, that ain't *exactly*..." or "Oh, you *know* how things are, Frank..." and "Now don't get sore, Frank..."

But he knew what they meant. It stuck up in their craws like a raw potato too big to get down.

Leinard spoke quietly, surely. "You remember Louise Springer, the girl they had for schoolmarm 'bout three years back?" They nodded. His face slipped into an expression of sadness.

"Remember there was a lot of talk I was going to marry up with her?" They nodded again, and Anse Pfeiffer from the General Store added, "We never knew what happened there, Frank. Never thought it was our look-to finding out. No call to bring it up now, is there?"

Leinard nodded his head somberly. "Yes, Anse. There is. Just as there's reason to bring up now that I've never been invited to your house for supper. Nor yours, Pete, nor Morn's house, nor Karl's neither. Why's that?"

They stammered again, averting their eyes.

"When I asked Louise Springer to marry me," Frank Leinard said,

with a tinge of coolness in his voice, "you know what she said?" They did not answer. Each stared elsewhere. It was not an easy thing they were asking of this big man who had served them for so long a time.

"I'll tell you. She said: 'No, I can't do it, Frank.' So I asked her why, and after a long while she told me. I had to look up a word with Doc Crenkell, 'cause I didn't know what it was. You know what she called me, you men? She called me a pariah.

"You know what that is...answer me! You know?"

They shook their heads. His voice was hungry, and tortured, and straining. Not soft and warm, but lost and sad.

"It means an outcast; someone no one else wants to go near. So I asked her what she meant, and she looked at me like I was shot in the belly. You understand? Like she was sorry for me. *Me!* Frank Leinard, the Sheriff! Sorry for me. Then she went ahead and said, 'Frank, you're a good man, under it all, and maybe a better man before you came here; but they've hired you to kill and that's what you are...a hired gun. No matter if you got the law with you or not, you're a hired killer. And they know that. No matter how much anyone likes you as a man, Frank, they see that gun and what you are, and *no one* is going to associate with you. Because you're a pariah. They made you that, and that's the reason I'm not going to marry you, Frank.'"

Leinard sat back down carefully, and he turned his head away so they could not see his eyes. "So that's why I've never been invited to eat with any of you, and that's why I never got married, and that's why I made so much about this town bein' *my* town, and I wanted it to be the cleanest, best town.

"Now you come and tell me, 'Thanks, Frank, you risked your life every day, and you neatened our town for us, and now it's done, you can go.' Is that it? Is that what you're sayin' to me?"

He folded his hands; and now he turned back so they could see his face; and they saw, perhaps for the first time they truly saw that big Frank Leinard the Sheriff was not a young man any longer. They looked at one another, and Morn Ashley nudged Pete Redallo with his elbow. Pete said: "But, Frank, you don't get what we mean. I—I know, I mean, I know it's *your* town and all, but times has changed and we don't *need* a hired gun—I mean, we don't need your *kind* of Sheriff no more."

He stammered to silence, and looked ashamed.

Then they saw Frank Leinard's body stiffen, and he looked up with that strength in him, and he said levelly, "This is my town, gentlemen. I helped clean it, helped make it safe for you *little* men to run your businesses and get rich with. Now you think you're gonna throw me out and tell me to go find a nice tree out there somewhere, and bed

down under it till I die, so's I don't embarrass you?

"Well, there ain't many trees out there in *barranca* country; and there ain't many towns; and this one is mine. This is *my* time and I'm stayin'.

"There ain't one of you who can outfox me or outdraw me, so just *try* and get me out!"

Then he stood up, and his chest swelled, and it brought the .44 into their sight even bigger, so they left. He stood by the window, watching them talking as they crossed the street to the Palace. It still felt like rain was coming.

It got worse. Much worse. They started crossing the street to avoid him, and a petition was shoved under the office door one morning.

On the following Wednesday, a riot broke out in the telegraph office while he was eating at Fenner's, and they did not call him; they settled it themselves. That made him feel insecure, hurt, angry. So he got back at them by arresting Bill Pillby for carrying a gun in town.

Everyone knew Bill had been hunting that day and had only stopped in town to pick up some staples on his way back to his spread; but Frank saw him and threw him in the single cell before anyone could do anything about it. A delegation from the Council came, then, and told Frank he was getting too rambunctious, and he ordered them out. When they gave him trouble, he pulled the .44 on them. Then it took Doc Crenkell and the Judge to get Bill out.

But he held onto Pillby's well-tended and much-loved Sharps 74, and sent him out of town telling him he'd drop by the spread to return it, one day next week when he was out that way. And there wasn't anything Pillby or the Judge or Doc Crenkell could say about it being a necessity, about it being Bill Pillby's right arm, that could make the Sheriff accommodate.

A week later, in a slamming rain that had turned the main drag into an ankle-deep river of mud, he beat into insensibility two fence-riders from the B-slash-D who had brought in some forgework for the blacksmith, Quent Farrier.

Because they had to wait overnight and half the next day, the two waddies had spent some time at the Palace. Maybe they were a bit louder than they'd have been without having emptied a bottle of Kentucky between them, but everyone swore that when they offered to tote home the groceries for the piano teacher as she came out of the General Store, even when she resisted their roughhouse good humor—even Anse Pfeiffer, who was right there—swore to it—they were at worst tipsily polite. But all the witness they made probably couldn't have stopped Frank Leinard, who pistol-whipped and fisted them into

the mud; and in the process dumped the piano teacher's goods into the mire, where they were split open and trampled.

Things went from bad to worse, and one day the bartender at the Palace had to throw Frank out for being drunk and smashing steins on the floor. He barely missed getting shot.

No one knew what to do.

So they decided to hire a gun from Silver City to wing Frank, and get him out of town.

Frank killed the *pistolero* when the swarthy, pimple-faced man tried to take him out from under cover in an alley between the Palace and Fenner's. Then Frank went and arrested the men he thought were behind it. Three of them were innocent, but it didn't seem to matter to Leinard.

So they decided to bushwhack him.

Frank Leinard lay outside the Palace, in the dusty street. The night had closed down tightly, and a few folks had come into town for the dance. They passed him as he lay there, drunk, with his twisted, sewed-up gun-arm thrown out in a crazy S beside him.

One woman—Morn Ashley's wife—pursed her lips and shook her head as she went by, saying, "Ever since he got shot up like that, he's been just no good. Drunk all the time. Why do you men on the Council keep him on pension, Morn?"

And Pete Redallo came by with his three kids. He stood for a moment, spread-legged, staring down at the drunken ex-Sheriff, and cursed softly, so the kids would not catch it.

"Should have run him out of town, not just crippled him," he said. "But you can't simple turn away a man that helped clean up the town."

They went on.

Others came by, not wanting to be late for the dance, and carefully stepped around Leinard. They all went by, and few of them heard what he was muttering, face in the dust.

Even had they heard, none of them would have understood what he meant when he said, "There's damn few trees out there in the *barranca*."

No one missed the dance that night. It was a good dance; a friendly, civilized dance, with no fights. That was because it was such a friendly, civilized town, was Bartisville.

3 FACES OF FEAR: AN ESSAY

1

Chill beneath a cadaverously gray Autumn sky, the tiny New Mexico town. That slate moment in the seasons when everything begins to grow dark. The epileptic scratching of fallen leaves hurled along sidewalks. Mad sounds from the hills. Cold. And something else:

A leopard, escaped, is loose in the town.

Chill beneath a crawling terror of death in the night, the tiny New Mexico town. That thick red moment in the fears of small people when everything explodes in the black flow of blood. A deep-throated growl from a filthy alley. Cold.

A mother, preoccupied with her cooking, tells her small daughter to go down the street to the bakery, get a loaf of bread. The child shows a moment of fear...the animal they haven't found yet...

The mother insists, it's only a half block to the bakery. Put on a shawl and go get that bread, your father will be home soon. The child goes. Hurrying back up the street, the bread held close to her, the street empty and filling with darkness, ink presses down the sky, the child looks around, and hurries. A cough in the blackness behind her. A cough, deep in a throat that never formed human sounds.

The child's eyes widen in panic. She begins to hurry. Her footsteps quicken. The sound of padding behind her. Feet begin to run. Focus on darkness and the sound of rapid movement. The child. The rushing.

To the wooden door of the house. The door is locked. The child pinned against the night, with the furred sound of agony rushing toward her on the wind.

Inside, the mother, still kitchened, waiting. The sound of the child outside, panic and bubbles of hysteria in the voice, Mommy open the door the leopard is after me!

The mother's voice assumes the ages-old expression of harassed parenthood. Hands on hips, she turns to the door, you're always lying, telling fibs, making up stories, how many times have I told you lying will—

Mommy! Open the door!

You'll stay out there till you learn to stop lying!

Mommy! Mom—

Something gigantic hits the door with a crash. The door bows inward, and dust from between the cracks sifts into the room. The mother's eyes grow huge, she stares at the door. A thick black stream, moving very slowly, seeps under the door. Madness crawls up behind our eyes, the mother's eyes, and we sink into a pit of blind emptiness...

...from which we emerge to examine the nature of terror in the motion picture. Fear as the masters of the film form have shown it to us, and fear as the screen has recently depicted it, with adolescence and cheap thrills. Fear in three guises, with an attempt to understand its value, note its proportions, taste it, sink a hand into it and draw out a vital organ if possible. First, a memory of fear from a childhood spent in the dark, watching Lugosi, watching Lorre, watching Richard Dix as the Whistler, watching—among others, and most notably—the films of Val Lewton.

The scene depicted at the outset of this examination, a scene shot in small screen, in black and white, with a minimum of production values (as currently conceived by the LARGER film-makers), with unknown actors, shot by indirection and subtlety rather than the sound of hands clapping sharply in your ear to startle you, that scene was from a 1943 RKO Radio Picture, *The Leopard Man*.

I may have recalled it completely inaccurately. I wouldn't know. I saw the picture only once, when I was nine years old, at a Saturday afternoon matinee in the Lake Theatre in Painesville, Ohio.

That scene, that thick, glutinous flow of little girl blood beneath a heavy oak door, has stayed with me for twenty-two years. It scared me. It scared me at the time. It scares me now. I was afraid, and when I recount this scene to listeners today, I can impart the same fear to them, merely in the retelling.

When was the last time you were frightened by a film? Truly frightened. Frightened enough to worry about it much later, when your thoughts were elsewhere, and suddenly *that* came back to you? The shower sequence in *Psycho*? The unmasking in *Phantom of the Opera*? The discovery of the bloodless sled-dog in Hawks' *The Thing*? Bette Davis serving Joan Crawford her canary in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*? or possibly a fillip from Polanski's *Repulsion*? If it was this last, part three of this examination may annoy you. If it was any of the others, then perhaps you have already thought the thoughts I will offer next.

But it is a progression. Before a dissection can have any worth, we must examine the whole organism, and for the first part of this discussion of the anatomy of fear, I offer as the finest example of

terror in its most natural, unsullied, incarnation, the *oeuvre* of Val Lewton.

To *afficionados* of all that is worthy and touched by glory in the film medium, the name Lewton will be no great surprise. To those who play at understanding movies, who ride with the tide, or who take their cues from slickpaper yellowsheets such as *Time* or *Newsweek* (and I level this derogation with calculation to be elaborated upon later), I would better have struck the responsive *kitsch* chord by citing the early Dassin, or Hitchcock.

But as a truer barometer of the centigrades to which horror can inflame a filmgoer, I find no contest with what Lewton produced in merely eight films from 1942 to 1946, with budgets so ludicrous, achievements so startling and studio intentions so base that they stand as some sort of landmark in the landscape of cinema.

Lewton began as a story editor for Selznick and shortly thereafter was placed in charge of a new low-budget production unit at RKO, expressly created to specialize in cheapjack horror films. It was born out of the need for lower-half double-bill films to accompany big-budget vehicles, with a sort of antediluvian “exploitation” approach and very little else to recommend its product. But RKO had no idea of the nature of the monster they were creating. Lewton was given titles such as *The Cat People*, *I Walked With A Zombie*, *Isle of the Dead*, *The Ghost Ship*. He was then set to the (supposedly) inglorious task of making *schlock* fit only for Times Square scratch-theatre gleaners.

In his first film, *The Cat People*, Lewton explored the psychiatric and emotional implications of lycanthropy through the medium of a beautiful young girl who thinks she has inherited the taint of animal transvestism—her alter-ego a panther. It is the foremost of only three films Simone Simon made in this country that can stand today as having been worth the doing. Many have called it a classic.

In *The Body Snatcher*, made in 1945, Lewton used the incomparable Karloff to full advantage in a thinly-veiled retelling of the Burke & Hare grave-robbing story. (How did that old tot-terrifier go? “Burke’s the butcher, Hare’s the thief; and Knox the boy who buys the beef.” Well, *however*, it was the strange story of the doctor who needed cadavers for autopsy purposes, who bought his meat from a pair of unsavorys not above catching the anatomical visual aids while they were still very much alive and kicking.)

In *Bedlam*, 1946, Lewton opened with a full-screen medium closeup of Hogarth’s famous painting of the Eighteenth Century English madhouse, dollied in on it to extreme closeup and then did a wax-dissolve to a letter-perfect real life scene, precisely as the painting showed it. The credits on the film nodded to Hogarth, possibly the

only time in the history of film that a painting (rather than a play, a novel, a song, or a title) inspired a motion picture. Lewton went on to explore the conditions in lunatic asylums with Karloff, and what later institutional liberals exposed about the criminal conditions in our asylums, was all there for them to see, years before the hue and cry for reforms.

Of *I Walked With A Zombie*, Lewton is reported to have said, “They may never recognize it, but what I’m going to give them in *I Walked With A Zombie* is ‘Jane Eyre In The West Indies’.” (The author must at this time bow in the direction of scenarist De Witt Bodeen, from whose article in the April 1963 issue of *Films in Review* that quotation—and much of the minutiae of this section on Lewton—emanates.)

To show the incredible broken-field-running of Lewton as a producer, against odds calculated to produce nothing but *merde*, *I Walked With A Zombie* was inspired by a Hearst Sunday supplement series. If you don’t think what he brought forth was remarkable, catch a re-run of this film on a Saturday afternoon tv showing, and compare it (bearing in mind what inspired it) with what horrors of an entirely different stripe have been produced by moviemakers with acromegalic budgets, e.g., *Moby Dick*, *Cleopatra*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *King of Kings*, *55 Days at Peking*, *Circus World*, *Ship of Fools*, the list goes on with truly terrifying overpopulation. (I refer, of course, to the most recent incarnations of each of the foregoing films.)

Praising Lewton has become, in recent years, an “in” game of the “in crowd.” There is no great bravery on my part to single him out as the perpetrator of the *ne plus ultra* in horror films. Yet in all of these huzzahs, there has never been a satisfactory explanation of precisely *what* it is in those films of fear that makes them perfect models for the sluggards currently infesting the genre. Nor has there been a rationale for why these films are always referred to as “Lewton’s films” rather than Karloff’s films, or Jacques Tourneur’s films—though he directed three of the finest—or Mark Robson’s films—though he directed four—or Robert Wise’s films—though he did two, of which one, *Curse of the Cat People*, remains today as one of the most original plumbings of a child’s mentality. They are always called *Lewton’s* films, and therein lies the secret not only of successfully producing films of fear, but of the art of *producing*, itself.

Lewton’s role as producer was anything but that of the stereotyped fat-cat, thumbs hooked in the pockets of his velvet vest, cigar masticated between gopher teeth, eyes on the till and heart of blackest anthracite. He was a creator.

In a recent conversation with actor Robert Blake (incidentally, another immense talent Hollywood has done ill to ignore), the point

was made that in every successful production, whether television or feature film, the presence of one strong man can be seen: whether the lead actor, or the head writer, or the director, or the producer, if there is one man with balls enough to swing his weight in the cause of artistic integrity, what emerges, nine times out of 9.89, is worth viewing, while the reverse proportion holds for those efforts born of Art by Committee Decision. This, I think, is the secret of why Lewton's films were always *Lewton's* films, and why they bore an unmistakable stamp of continuity of talent.

What he thought about his work, and how he conveyed these thoughts to men like Tourneur (still another fine talent who, while he works regularly, has been denied access to top production directorial chores that would have placed him with the best in the field), was the cornerstone of Lewton's success, the vitality that brought more than animation to his creations—that brought *life* to them. One example:

In *The Bad and The Beautiful*, Kirk Douglas, playing a producer who has been advised his first film will be a horror film (very much like *The Cat People*) convinces his staff that blatant visualizations of horror must be avoided by the simple expedient of flicking off the lights in his office, and telling them the story in the dark. It is a remarkably effective scene, and the strongest cinematic argument ever made for subtlety and indirection in film-making. He is thoroughly convincing, of course.

This incident was precisely what Lewton did with his staff on *The Cat People*. The story became Hollywood legend, and has now been preserved as fiction.

Thus, portrait of a *producer*.

Producing, I submit, is not primarily a matter of budgets, schedules, manipulations or politics (though in the latter stages no producer succeeds in this arena without knowing how to move them pieces around the board). It is, in the gestation period, a matter of instincts, insights, the eye of Art—and I'll damned well use the cap "A" every time—and gonads. The producer whose sole concern is "product" is doomed merely to make money.

Pause, while the fat-cats chuckle on their way to the bank. Yeah, we know that bit. Nice talking to you, fellahs. Move on, so we can get back to the business of *creating*, as opposed to *producing*.

Lewton typifies the creative producer, with an instinctive love and appreciation of form, grace, direction, and message. His films were never polemics, nor were they studiously "arty." But they were always meaningful, had something important to say about people and the Times, and they were always artistic.

Much of this, I contend, came from the fact that Lewton was filming fear and terror and horror, and that way lies a touchstone for

the motion picture audience.

Since the first night of Man, hunkered down hairy and hungry by the primeval lightning-borne food fire, fear has been the prime mover. Forget momma love and posterity and man's unquenchable curiosity. Fear is the primary mode of locomotion of *homo sapiens*, as Mel Brooks suggests. Show hairy Man a pair of yellow eyes just outside the ring of light thrown by that first fire, and within twenty minutes he'll have invented the crossbow, the arbalest, the mace, Thompson submachine guns and klieg lights to chase that mother away.

We walk through all the days and nights of our lives terrified. Of the world that surrounds us, of one another, of the unknown, of ourselves. Fear is the hammer that leaves us stunned and speechless. Fear is the goad that sends us to places we fear to be in, to find out things we're scared witless to know. Fear.

Of this simple fact, Lewton was a master.

He knew there was more monstrousness in the *sound* of a killer cat slinking through the branches of a tree that brushed the top of a graveyard's stone wall, than all the Godzillas or Rodans ever pulled by puppet strings. He played like a Landowska on the stops and keys of the psyche. He let you build the monsters in your mind, in that terrible nightland of individual torment no studio special effects man could ever visit. It was the visual application of the secret of old-time radio. (What some call the sense of wonder. The reason why no tv can ever rival a radio program for opulence of sets.)

It was *suggestion*, the use of the power of the mind, that made Lewton's films so terrifying. It was an instinctive regard and respect for the imaginations and mentalities of his audiences—as he respected his own imagination, intellect, and originality—that led Lewton surely and surefootedly to the one infallible path of fear. He thought he could make intelligent films for intelligent people. This is a concept largely ignored in Hollywood, these days, by producers of the Stanley Shapiro/Ross Hunter cadre, who make movies as intellectually demanding as a Giant Golden Book, and who seemingly visualize their audiences as microcephalics fit only to salivate over the constantly-imminent deflowering of Doris Day, or the shade of puce in a Jean Louis gown.

Lewton did not merely invite the filmgoer to use his gourd, he *demand*ed it. He led them up to the door of terror and commanded them, “**KNOCK!**”

As with all work that either approaches or becomes Art, there is a specific and enormous demand on the observer, *by* the very nature and dimensions of the work *itself*, to commit; to participate; to bring something very individual and personal *to* the *work*, to expand it, in

effect. To add to it. To enlarge it. To color it and intensify it, to personalize it, if you will.

Fear is undeniably a *subjective* affection. It is personal. What scares you, may not scare me. Fear of spiders. Fear of drowning. Fear of immolation, being buried alive, suffocation. Fear of snakes. Fear of needles. In 1984, Orwell's Winston Smith is finally broken by being led to Room 101 of the Ministry of Love, the room containing that which most easily can break a man—the thing he secretly fears most. In Smith's case...rats. Each of us has his own Room 101 (which was, in many ways, what Orwell was trying to say in his novel) and each of us can find himself as insensible, as useless as a bag of shattered toys, if the proper subjective stimuli is employed. This was Lewton's secret for terror.

He was, in many ways, a consummate student and applicator of gestalt psychology. He opened all the doors to all the rooms numbered 101.

But Lewton employed a much more mature and subtle approach to the concept of fear. His was a second-level psychology, different from the typical "sharp noise" or "sharp movement" of most horror films, where you are momentarily frightened by a (for instance) hand suddenly jumping into the frame. He must have had knowledge of the reversal-of-impulse concept, either unconsciously or by study. To explain:

From Köhler on fear: "When a sudden event is felt to cause fright, a very strong impulse to move away from the event arises at the same time...Does anyone believe that the child feels his fear of the object, and the impulse to withdraw his hand, as two unrelated experiences? Or that, in his fear, the child might just as well feel a tendency to *embrace or to swallow the disturbing object?* [Italics mine.]...Just as an impulse of withdrawal arises directly from certain situations, so the opposite tendency is felt to be adequate in other situations."

Thus, when confronted by Lewton's horrors, we cover our eyes. And peek.

In *The Cat People* the fiancée of the hero is trapped in a swimming pool by a creature we do not see. It circles the pool, and she screams again and again. We are petrified with fear, but we are drawn to the scene inexorably. For long moments as the *very* long scene is played, we do not breathe. And not once do we see what it is we fear. The child in us walks to Room 101 and stares in numbed terror at the darkness beyond.

This was Lewton's secret, and the thread that made of his tapestries works of Art rather than just momentarily amusing cartoons. The fears inside us, the fears of the dark, of youth, or of the unknown. The

modern terrors that outstrip all the werewolves, vampires and ghouls Transylvania ever exported.

Explaining what terror is becomes a bore. It is akin to dissecting humor or honesty or love. Easy enough to cite examples of each, but murder trying to explain why they work.

Lewton's films worked. Nothing more need be said. They were the heartmeat of fear. The apotheosis of true mortal terror. What we get these days is something that exists elsewhere, and does not work in the same way, nor nearly as well. I have gone into some detail on Lewton, to set the reader up for the tirade that follows, for without knowing what a critic stands *for*, it is impossible to validate what he is *against*.

I am *for* Lewton's brand of terror.

I am *against* what Polanski did in *Repulsion*, in many ways. But between the two poles, there lies a no man's land of films that *should* have employed terror, and did not, and before we reach Polanski, I beg your indulgence for a brief detour through counties not generally considered haunts of terror.

For in the traveltalks we may suffer through these unfamiliar counties, we may discover something not only of the nature of failure in current Hollywood fear-films, but of the general nature of boredom and failure in much of the cinema we get these days.

Onward.

2

Let's shake 'em up a little:

King Rat, as a film, is a failure. *The Loved One*, as a film, is also a failure, but for entirely different reasons. *Bunny Lake Is Missing* is the biggest failure of the three, again for different reasons.

And all three fail because they were lousy films of fear.

Fear? *King Rat* a film of fear? *The Loved*—what the hell is he talking about? Are they reeling? Let's hit them a little harder.

Bunny Lake is a cheat, from start to finish. *King Rat* is a wretched bore. *The Loved One* not only cheats and bores, but is in execrable taste, but not in the way its campy makers intended. It's just a very sick series of private jokes, and misses vivisection of the horrors it originally intended by at least six feet deep. And all three of them could have profited from Lewton's rules of terror. From which point—as we departed from section one of this triptych—we invade the Country of the Blind. Namely, the big fear moviemakers.

King Rat was taken from an excellent novel by James Clavell. It should never have been a movie. The fat-cats live in constant

trepidation; it is the climate of Hollywood. You are only as good as your last film. Ergo, insure the next one. Pick something that was a success on the legitimate stage, or a best-selling novel, or a remake of something popular. (Because of this last, we have been “treated” to such displays as new versions of classics like *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *Three Coins in the Fountain* and *Rashomon* [as *The Outrage*; a film made purely for money, so plagiaristic in execution that it could not even be redeemed by calling it the sincerest form of flattery]. And we can look forward to a remake of *Stagecoach* with current lightweights of the Ann-Margret school mocking parts made memorable by Claire Trevor, John Wayne and Thomas Mitchell. One day soon we must discuss the venality and stupidity of producers who have the temerity to revamp films done to perfection the first time, merely to cash in on their perennial popularity.)

Thus, every novel that sells over sixteen copies becomes a film, without artistic regard for the suitability of a property for translation to the visual medium.

(And occasionally we get winners like *Sex & The Single Girl*, made from a title. How lucky we are.)

There are some books that were born to be *read*, not filmed. LORD JIM was one of these. SHIP OF FOOLS was another. Even Welles, in filming *The Trial*, came a cropper; and though he produced a film of excellence in his own vision, the mass of criticism leveled against him was based on the fact that it was not *Kafka's* version or attitude. That's tough, for the critics. They were not flexible enough to understand that THE TRIAL was not a book to be filmed, but a book to be *read*, as conceived by Kafka. But of the recent crop of “sure-fire money-making properties” translated by emasculation and amputation into second-rate films reaping box-office disaster, and deservedly so, *King Rat* is the prize example. It was a helluva book; it was a terrible film. Terrible, because it commits the one crime no work of art or entertainment should be allowed to commit unpunished.

It bores. It bores! Jeezus, to tears, it *bores*!

Now *how*—he asks, with incredulity in his voice—could a film about men suffering privation and each other's basest moralities in a Japanese prison camp, be boring?

The element of fear was missing.

Ah. Back to the point. Roundabout, but back, nonetheless.

The scene is Changi Prison, 1945. A prison whose bars and locks are invisible, yet no less binding than those of cast iron, for Changi's topological features are such that to escape is to die. There is no place to go. In the compound live ten thousand men who eke out a minimal existence by their wits and the tenacity to go on breathing just one breath longer, chiefly because it's built into the machine. But there is

King. He lives high. He is an entrepreneur, he is a mover, he is a provider, and in that strange way that only asserts itself in times of deepest tribulation, a leader and molder of men. But King wants only to make it for himself. He wheels, he deals, but he does not crawl on his belly like a reptile. He trades with the enemy for favors, and for the best of all reasons, Bryan Forbes' intention to make him loathsome to us, fails completely. He is the only smart one in the pack. He wants to do more than subsist, he wants to live with a certain style, and a great deal of comfort. Most of the men (if not all) hate him, but they serve him, for the residue favors that are left behind when King has had his fill. Now from this intrinsically exciting and emotionally ineluctable situation, it would seem impossible to derive anything but a film of tension and passion and importance.

But it was a novel of complex inner motivations, on a personal level, and to portray merely the outward, physical actualities of these dark drives, was to strip a story of psychological imperativeness down to the level of a shadow-play. All chiaroscuro. For in playing the story at the skin-level, Forbes and his cast eliminated the one thing that was dominant in the book: fear.

Because of the fact that Changi was a prison in which no one could contemplate escape, there was never the omnipresent fear of the brutal Japanese guards, nor of imminent death. It became a study of men merely trying to hang on. Now that is a reasonable subject for a novel, in which we penetrate the skulls of the principals, and experience the terrors to which they were heir, day by day, moment within moment. But eliminate that *internal* fear, all the Room 101's, and we are left with a landscape devoid of motivated, fearful particulars. All we have is an empty carcass.

Had Forbes understood the nature of fear, the nature of terror, he might have been able to save the film. But—and I will expect those of you who have not already seen the picture to see it, rather than accept my theory as some sort of *Obiter Dictum*—he had not studied his lessons; Lewton's lessons, mind you; and so all those heavy areas of light and dark were moved around like so much earth and gravel. This was a potentiality for a film of fear, in the same category with Lewton's subjects, but it was passed over in favor of more dubious "quality" elements. Nowhere in *King Rat* do we get the feel, the heft, the *weight* of trepidation, from anyone in the cast. Not even by cinematography or sets or direction is there the suspense of fear, the clutch of abiding terror. We have placidity, we have torpor, we have boredom.

And that is why *King Rat* fails.

Bunny Lake Is Missing, however, deals in fear and suspense and a

kind of psychological horror that Lewton would have understood and approved. Yet as baldly as *King Rat* misses its impact-points for lack of fear, it is a modern classic compared with the stumbling, falling-down silliness and ineptitude of Otto Preminger's latest carcinoma.

(Note to my mother, in Miami Beach: Dear Mom, I *know* I work in the industry, and I *know* they won't hire me, but there are times when the sensible writer in me finds himself outshouted by the Ivory Tower writer who deplores bad movies and the men who continue to make them on the strength of reputations ill-deserved. On the other hand, Mom, I've always had a tendency to bite the hand that feeds me. Check your own. Much love, Disraeli.)

Because of the total misapplication of the strictures and freedoms of the implement fear, *Bunny Lake* becomes an exercise in hoodwinkery. We are led down all the wrong garden paths, without even the justification of a valid denouement.

Given: a pretty young woman and her pretty young brother, who have recently arrived in England. The young man attends to his journalistic employment, and the young girl (whose husband is confusedly referred to on occasion, but, it is made clear, is no longer on the scene in any way) puts her child Bunny in a day nursery. When she goes to pick her up, the child is missing, and no one remembers seeing her at any time. The police Inspector who handles the case is forced further and further toward the conclusion that the girl is hallucinatory, and the child never existed.

Given: a mounting strain of hysteria on the part of the girl, who fights to convince the Inspector and the world at large that Bunny does, indeed, exist, and is in terrible danger. The brother continues to drop inadvertent hints that Sis may be around-the-bend, despite his reiteration that Bunny does exist, and he will stand by his sibling come what may.

Given: a long, drawn-out crawl toward fifteen minutes of madness at the end of which we discover the brother is the whack, and has kidnapped the child himself, to keep his sister beside him, keep her love and attention for himself. A case of arrested adolescence. Or something.

Taken from a suspense novel by Evelyn Piper (which I must confess I have not read), this would seem to be a fulsome subject for a film of fear. Yet no one I know who saw this picture, myself included of course, felt anything but cheated when it was done. Why? I submit it was in the misunderstanding of the tenets of fear, and what is permissible in directing the logic of an audience in this area. If there was an internal consistency in the novel, it does not show up in the film.

Rather than merely solidify the points I am about to make by my own instinctive reactions, I approached the cornerstone of the structure of *Bunny Lake*—the madness of the brother—with an open mind, and consulted several texts on abnormal psychology. Everything I found led me to believe the character had been twisted to serve Mr. Preminger's ends. Even so, it seemed feasible that in the swampland of the deranged mind such a syndrome *might* be possible, and so I consulted an expert in the field, Dr. Eugene A. Levitt, Clinical Psychologist of the Peterson-Guedel Family Center, in Beverly Hills. After a lengthy discussion of the motion picture, and the aberration as delineated by Keir Dullea in the part of the brother, Dr. Levitt came to the following conclusions:

“Given a deviant personality structure as grossly pathological as that of the brother in *Bunny Lake*, it would seem highly improbable that it would be manifested solely in the area of his *feelings about* his sister. One would certainly expect to see signs of deviancy in his behavior *toward* the sister; not just at the dramatic moment when it best suits the purposes of the plot-makers of the film, but *consistently*, throughout. And possibly more important, because of the clearly psychotic personality with which we are presented at the final stages of the film, indicating an aberrant childhood relationship to his parents, additionally there should—reasonably—be visible symptomatology in his relations with *all* adults, most particularly with such authority figures as the Inspector, who in this situation most specifically parallels a father-image. The absence of these ‘clues,’ if you will, connotes an intentioned deceit on the part of the storytellers.”

Thus, we come to another pillar that must be present in the superstructure of the fear film, lest it fall down about the makers' ears, as does *Bunny Lake*. Fear must carry with it, its own internal consistency and logic. It is not merely enough to say *The Martian carries off the beautiful girl, kicking and screaming*.

If the Martian's body chemistry is completely alien to that of an Earthwoman, if he is a methane-breather, with a reproductive cycle closer to that of a chicken than to that of a human, then by all rights he should be raping a Rhode Island Red, not Kim Novak.

We are more terrified by the plight of Dorian Gray than all the Creatures who ever bubbled up from Black Lagoons, because we see reflected in Gray the terrors to which we are heir. The logic prevails in the one, and flees in the other.

We are led by the hand, by Mr. Preminger and his group, down a dark hallway toward a Room 101 that promises to hold unspeakable horrors. But when the door is opened, we find someone else's terror there, and we feel we have been subjected to flummery. Had

Preminger wished to make the film honestly, he would have carried the psychotic nature of the brother through the film, but obviously that would not have been dramatic enough, and the shock ending would have been pre-revealed. So Preminger lied to us. He altered the logic, made it inconsistent, and hoped that the pyrotechnics of the denouement would blind us to the cheat.

He failed, and with the failure comes the inescapable logic that if the film could not be made honestly, it should not have been made at all. We see in the stance of commercialism herewith adopted by Mr. Preminger, a similarity to the posture adopted by those who made *King Rat*. A neck-craning attitude, much like that of a flamingo, on one foot, precariously arching toward the money. It is an undignified stance.

Now we seem to be getting somewhere. We have set up a model of successful fear, the *oeuvre* of Lewton; we have established several seeming truths about fear's application in the visual medium: it must not bore, it must reflect the personal terrors of the audience, it must contain its own internal logic and consistency, it must employ the imagination and powers of expansion of the audience, and it must view (ideally) through new or original visions.

We have examined a film that failed in that it did not use fear when it should have. We have examined a film of fear which completely misunderstood and misused the tools of terror it needed to succeed. Now we will go all the way to the far wall and examine a film of humor that somehow strayed into the Country of Cold Chills when it should not have done so; and failed thereby.

The Loved One, based on a novel of biting satire by Evelyn Waugh. Which I have read. (Two out of three is pretty good.)

No one who has even scanned Jessica Mitford's incredible study of the funeral industry, *The American Way of Death*, can be oblivious to the horrors passim the trade in coffins and coagulants. It would seem impossible to produce a film around Waugh's shredding dissection of these latter-day ghouls that would not bring forth raves of delight, and kudos for honesty. To even *contemplate* a motion picture in which the saccharine sanctity of the down-the-hole boys is stripped away (revealing them as used car salesmen in mourning rags), automatically incurs the not-inconsiderable wrath of the Funeral Lobby and its local leech-lines. The question of honesty would seem not even to arise. The question of suicide, perhaps, but not honesty.

How then, is it possible that Tony Richardson and his high camp followers made such a dishonest film, such a disastrously unsuccessful film, such a depressing and off-the-mark film? A film about as funny as an acrobat in a polio ward? A film about as funny as a turd in a

punch bowl?

The answer, from this corner, lies in the intrusive shadow of fear that Richardson and his cast found themselves unable to dispel. Under a constantly-darkening veil of horror, the bizarre and the ludicrous intermingled with the hilarious and the hideous. In an attempt to make a film of humor about something basically ghastly, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *The Loved One* wandered slantwise into the Country of Terror and could not find its way out. Trapped on a landscape of gore and grue, dealing with the carrion-flesh of those who live off the dead, Richardson was forced to the outer edge of sanity and visual imagery, in a frenetic attempt to stave off the encroaching phantom of horror that permeated the film.

He was not able to escape. The picture was forced to adopt advertising that proclaimed, SOMETHING TO OFFEND EVERYONE! and I suppose in Coshocton, Ohio, they will be offended. But we are not dealing with the chauvinism and naïveté of the Bible Belt in these pages. (The presumption that first-level film criticism and fan magazine goshwow need not enter into our considerations *may* be unwarranted, but if that is what you, gentle reader, are seeking herein, one of us ought to be elsewhere.) The picture *is* offensive, but not in the way the producers intended.

As I said earlier, it is offensive because it substitutes cute for cutting, weird for witty, and camp for clever. If MGM wishes to cop-out, it may well save its critical bacon by proclaiming this one of the first of the pop art films. (Though I contend Godard's *Alphaville* is the front-runner in that category.) But that fear and terror permeated this film, in a way surely no one could have anticipated, is something Metro cannot deny.

Snap! We see Bobby Morse and Sir John Gielgud lunching in the studio commissary. Gielgud orders "the breast of Chicken, Lolita" and Morse orders "a Goldwater nut flip." Funny. Snap! Morse discovers Gielgud's body hanging grotesquely from the diving board of the weed-infested pool. Not funny. Snap snap!

The juxtaposition is alarming. We are made to laugh, then to shrink back in horror.

Snap! Anjanette Comer (surely one of the comeliest creatures God ever set down on this weary cinder to delight our eyes) wrestles about on the lawn with a salivating Morse, hellbent intent on invading her underwear. Amusing. Snap! Anjie Comer jams a pair of tubes of embalming fluid into her veins and dies slowly, slowly, very slowly. OhmiGod, not funny at all. Snap snap!

We are shown beauty, and it is tainted with madness. The juxtaposition is ghastly in its spectacle, in its roiled commingling of

pure and foul.

The vomity obese mother of Rod Steiger. Steiger's muscular faggotry. (There is sufficient reason to call it such, despite Steiger's obvious lust for Miss Comer, because of the almost rampant homosexuality of almost all of the other principals in the cast, in every scene, in every gesture, in all of the private jokes so blatantly put on display for the gay crowd. I'm not knocking it folks, I'm merely saying that it served to deepen the unconscious strains of unrest and nausea for those of us who don't happen to ride that particular hobby horse.) The Air Force romp with the tarts in the coffin room. The grotesqueries after grotesquerie piled one atop another. The dead dogs in the ice boxes. The very scent and smell of the funeral industry that reaches us through celluloid, through soundtrack, through flickering posturings of the players.

There is brilliance here, no question about it. But it is the deranged brilliance of a de Sade, the mad joy of an Octave Mirabeau or a Rimbaud. It is thoroughly decadent and debased brilliance. It is the invoking of the demons of fear and insanity, the creation of monster that, like a lynch mob, went berserk and devoured its makers. Consumed by their own creation, Richardson and his company now must exist in the blazing belly of the horror, knowing they somehow inadvertently cast the runes and read from the grimoire of terror, and brought forth they knew not what.

Here, in *The Loved One*, we see the incalculable power, the torment for producer and audience alike, the numbing quality of the implement fear. This was a partial awakening of the demon, and it managed in its somnambulistic sleepwalk to destroy a film of some importance. Loose, unfettered, uncontrolled, the fear Richardson came to work with, can be a juggernaut that lays waste the most honestly-intended film.

But with full knowledge, with the chains of understanding firmly wound in place, fear can be used to woo and capture the elusive mind-balance of an audience. In what particular areas Richardson's helplessness before the mad face of the God he unleashed can be observed, lies a vivid warning to other film-makers who would toy without understanding with the single most potent implement a film-man can employ. Richardson played with it, tried to tame it with guffaws and outrage, but it destroyed his film.

In part three of this survey, I will attempt to analyze the struggle of yet another St. George, who may not have slain the Dragon Fear, but certainly dealt it a helluva bruising. And in that direction, I suspect, lies the hope not only of the film of fear, but of the entire motion picture industry.

Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* is the closest thing to a Lewton-oriented film of fear to which we have been treated in recent memory. Many there may be who will cite *Psycho* and others who will say segments of *Charade* suit better the appellation. (Most noticeably in the latter, the frightening scene of James Coburn tied to a radiator, his face blue and distorted from suffocation, head gently wrapped in a common plastic clothing sack, of the type we are warned to keep away from children.)

There is validity in their points, but for overall terror—albeit flawed, as I will delineate further on—the Polanski vision of a beautiful young girl's progressive psychopathia is monumentally right for our attention here. I cannot quibble with the horror of the shower sequence in *Psycho*, nor of the final scene in which Tony Perkins talks with the voice of his mother (though I think the subliminal flashing of the death's head was a bit much), but match these against the subtle horror of Catherine Deneuve's performance, her sudden start of fear as the walls symbolically rend asunder overhead, the vagrant mad rubbing of the nose as she walks down a street in daylight, the head of the rabbit in her purse, the casual murders, the slatternly deterioration of the lovely girl...all of it, in totality, a numbing portrait of insanity in our times, laid out bare and quivering as the severed arteries of her victims.

Polanski is a man to watch.

It is entirely possible we have with us in the person of this young Polish director, another Lewton. From what we have seen of his first two films, it is obvious that Polanski's interests lie in the area of human motivations and interpersonal relationships. In *Knife in the Water* Polanski brought tension and originality to the time-worn theme of the eternal triangle. Alone on a small yacht, two men and a woman act out a drama of hate and frustration, of decadent lives and brutality, all on the most subtle of levels, all inextricably involved with the symbolic search of each man for his masculinity. This, told in the framework of a love / sex story as simple as any folk tale. In *Repulsion* we go very much into the mind of a girl going insane.

These are the topics Lewton might have explored, had he lived longer. In point of fact, the similarities between *The Cat People* and *Repulsion*, each with a heroine living with delusions and murder, are uncanny. It would be interesting to know if Polanski is familiar with Lewton's work.

But whether consciously aware or otherwise, what Polanski does in his films, to a marked degree, is what Lewton did. The movement,

the easy manipulation of great masses of light and dark, the emphasis on the dark mind of the contemporary man and woman, the force of study on the terrors that beset us all...these are the trembles and trinkets Lewton found indispensable to the production of small classics of fear.

Polanski seems unerringly to find the way of most terror, in the same vector of talent that was Lewton's. But there are differences—both in motivation and technique—between Polanski and Lewton. Differences that occasionally mar and blight what Polanski has brought forth, and against which Polanski hurled his talent, not always successfully.

Earlier I snapped at *Time* and *Newsweek*, and promised I would elaborate on the attack. My reasons are simply considerations of honesty and the inherent values of serious criticism. When I am manic, it is my belief that we *need* critics: sober and dedicated men and women who will remind us of the heritage of the past in the Arts, who will try to keep our level of attention and achievement at highest tide. (It hardly needs more demonstration than a flicking on of the TV set to prove that if left to its own devices, the taste of the *mass*—per Sturgeon's Law—will inevitably sink to the lowest possible common denominator.) Both *Time* and *Newsweek*, and the soporific little journals that imitate their approach to reviewing, debase the act of criticism. They become exercises in cleverness; turns of the phrase with tongues in cheeks...admittedly making for garble. They are first to follow the trend of what is "in," and first to condemn what they do not understand. The shabby need to appear street-smart, cutting edge, in the know, *au courant*, hip...at all costs; and the spiteful vengefulness when they realize they don't understand the film, that they are dunce-cap befuddled! They turn their reviews into something like popularity contests, and where the function of constructive criticism is most needed, it is absent in their approach. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* praised *Repulsion* outrageously, without taking the time or indulging the cerebration that would have recognized its flaws, and thus enriched the lessons Polanski might have learned, thus benefitting his methodology in future films. Thus, my fury at the newsmagazines. They chose the way of the cop-out, the line of least resistance, the dazzlement of technique that should not have kept the serious critic from his craft. For Polanski pulled a rabbit out of a hat, and no one so far has bothered to notice that the rabbit was dead.

And in their hurry to add another film to the *Recommended* listings, the clowns failed to serve the artist who needed their comments, needed their attention, needed the benefit of their critical faculties.

It is altogether too easy to say that *Repulsion* is the closest thing to

a perfect film of fear we have had since Lewton. Too easy, because of the obviousness of the comment. It is a fine film, a close-to-perfect film. But as I noted earlier, I am *against* what Roman Polanski did in *Repulsion*, in many ways. For he chose to substitute effect for logic, he chose to substitute adolescent fear for mature fear, he chose to be blatant rather than subtle, and in the final analysis, his genius carried him when he should have been relying on skill and craft.

What follows, these observations, are made in a spirit of camaraderie, with honorable intent. For it is my belief that Roman Polanski is one of the most adventurous and stimulating directors in the world of the cinema today. What they like to call a “promising” director. It is entirely possible that he bears within him the seeds of authentic greatness. And to the end that he not be whipped by sycophants, that he escape the too-soon adulation of those who toss away all critical objectivity in the sack-race to praise him soonest, that he not sacrifice growth for easy success, these comments are offered with respect and gratitude for bringing to the screen an individual and important talent.

But a talent that still needs comment.

Repulsion functions almost entirely on two levels. The first, a purely physical level of progression of events that sends the heroine through a series of emotional and psychological ambivalences. The second, a completely subjective fantasy-world that is reflection and refraction and distortion of the mental state of the girl. Where these two impinge, where they bisect each other, we have the most stunning and successful moments of the film. When we are helplessly drawn into the mind of the young girl and find ourselves staring down at the severed head of a raw rabbit in her purse we are assaulted by an admixture of nausea and horror. Like the child-in-fear to which Köhler referred in Part One of this article, we are both repulsed and attracted. We cover our eyes when Catherine Deneuve grapples with the lecherous landlord, but we peek between our fingers to see the moment she will slash him across the neck with the naked straight-razor.

Polanski plays on our feelings of fear toward sharp instruments, blades, knives; on our loathing of slippery men who attempt rape; on our ambivalent pity for the girl assaulted and trepidation for the man whom we know cannot stand for a moment against the assault of her insanity. We are tossed and turned by our own fears and the conditioned impulses of our upbringing.

In these areas, Polanski is a master.

But in the areas of motivation and logic, he opts rather for scintillation and pyrotechnics than for plotting.

We must line-out the basic story, first, however, before we can explain where Polanski did not do a full job: Catherine, a Belgian manicurist working in a Harriet Hubbard Ayer-type beauty salon in London, lives with her highly-sexed sister, who in turn shares bed-space with a rather hairy salesman. They make it frequently, and on the night silence comes the off-screen moaning and panting that sends sleepless Catherine under the covers in the next room. We understand almost immediately that the pretty Dresden figurine that is Catherine, conceals a mind that is torn with ambivalence at the thought of sex. She is attracted to, and repulsed by, the sight of her sister's paramour. Catherine has a boyfriend. He is a gentleman, but she is so strange, so distant at times, that he suffers the ribbing of his pub-crawling friends with ill humor. Finally, Sis carts off to the hinterlands on holiday with her Lothario, and Catherine is left in their small flat with an uncooked coney on a plate, and the stench of encroaching lunacy. As she exists there in the somnolence, we see her illusions—great cracks suddenly ripping down the walls, hands thrusting out of a hall corridor that has turned to mud, rapists breaking down her doors, lurking under her bedsheets. Finally, as her mind disintegrates before our very eyes, she uses the razor on the landlord who comes to get the rent and stays to paw her shape. (Prior to this she has clubbed her boyfriend to death and dumped him in the bathtub, when he broke down the door to find out if she was all right or not. Hell of a way to find out.) In the end, the sister and lover return, to find Catherine in a catatonic state, and the joint surfeited with dead meat, not all of which is rabbit. Final shot, we dolly slowly in on an old photograph of the family, and we see Catherine-the-child. Her eyes. Quite mad. A twinkle of lunacy as she sees the world.

In his overwhelming impulse to show us the progression of Catherine's madness, the rapid overtaking of her mind by a desire / revulsion of sex, Polanski handles the delusions with startling facility, presenting them so realistically, that for *moments* after they are over, we have to reorient ourselves that they were only wraiths of Catherine's mind. In this, he employs the Lewton technique with great facility and impact.

But it is all demonstration, without motivation.

Questions, never asked, much less answered:

- Why is Catherine afraid of men?
- If she is so terrified of men, how did she get a boyfriend, and why does he persist in following her?
- Is her sister so dense that she has not noticed this obvious aberrant behavior previously?

- What was Catherine's relationship with her parents, most specifically her father (as subtly hinted in the final shot of the family photograph), that brought on this derangement?
- Why didn't Polanski either tell or suggest the answers to these questions, and many others, of motive and personality?

Which brings me to my final point, on the nature of fear in films, its use, and the dangers therein present.

Fear in the hand of a motion picture maker, like a shotgun in the hands of a baby, need not necessarily be properly aimed to make a helluva bang. But to hit the target dead-on, requires maturity and thought.

Polanski, to my mind undisputed heir to the throne left vacant by Lewton, is a master of technique and hoodwinkery. He substitutes effects for the deeper logic of the situations his stories imply. Fear in his hands is a weapon that he uses to stun the audience, to reduce them to adolescent trepidation. But when the theatre has been left alive, the fear vanishes. Instead of making us understand the nature and impetus of the horrors that grip Everyman, he has dazzled us, and when the sparklers fade, we depart untouched and our sight restored.

To be entirely successful, a film of fear must deal with logic and the explanations that logic demands.

Polanski came closest to the superlatives with which Lewton dealt. Closer than Hitchcock, closer than Dassin, closer than anyone who has attempted the film of fear in many years.

There is a lesson to be learned here. Not only for Polanski who, God willing, will persist in improving himself and create finer films of fear, but for the entire motion picture industry, currently glutting its production schedules with vapid comedies, senseless extravaganzas and ludicrous spy dramas as improbable as the Loch Ness monster. The lesson is simply that the intelligence of film audiences is a fine-honed tool, an additive that can be used to enrich any film. Moviegoers are ready to laugh, ready to shriek, ready to involve themselves to the eyeballs with films that demand something of them, as Polanski and Lewton demanded something of them.

They are saying, in the way they spend their money at certain box-offices, "There is nothing to fear but the lack of fear."

A word to the wise ought to be sufficient. Ahead of you lie all the corridors with all the Room 101s, numbered. All that is required is that you knock.

BLIND LIGHTNING

When Kettridge bent over to pick up the scurrying red lizard, the thing that had been waiting, struck.

Thought: *this is the prelude to the Time of Fast. In bulk this strangely-formed will equal many cat-litters. It is warm and does not lose the essence. When the Essence-Stealer screams from the heavens, this strangely-formed will be many feastings for me. Safety and assured essence are mine. O boon at last granted! To the Lord of the Heaven I turn all thought! Lad-nar's essence is yours at ending!*

The thing rose nine feet on powerfully-muscled legs; it had a sheened, glistening fur. It resembled a gorilla and a brahma bull and a kodiak bear and a number of other Terran animals, but it was none of them. The comparison was inaccurate and brief as the moment Kettridge half-turned. He saw one of the thing's huge paws crashing toward him. The brief moment ended and Kettridge lay unconscious.

The huge beast bent from the waist and scooped up the man in the form-fitting metallic suit, brushing in annoyance at the belt of tools around the human's waist.

Lad-nar looked over one massive shoulder at the sky.

Even as he watched, the roiling dark clouds split and a forked brilliance stabbed down at the jungle. Lad-nar squinted his eyes, unconsciously lowering the thin secondary lids over them, filtering out the worst of the light.

He shivered as the roar screamed across the sky.

Off to his left another blast of lightning fingered down, struck a towering blue plant with a shower of sparks and a dazzling flash. Thunder bubbled after it. The jungle smoked.

Thought: *many risings and settings of the great warmer it has taken this Time of Fast to build. Now it will last for many more. The great warmer will be hidden and the cold will settle across the land. Lad-nar must find his way to the Place of Fasting. This strangely-formed will be many feastings.*

He shoved the man under one furry arm, clasping his unconscious burden tightly. Lad-nar's eyes were frightened. He knew the time of death and forbidden walking was at hand.

He loped off toward the mountains.

The first thing Kettridge saw when he awoke was the head of the beast. It was hanging suspended in the light from the storm. The roar of the rain pelting down in driving sheets, the brilliant white light of the lightning, all served as background for the huge beast's head. That wide, blunt nose, three flaring nostrils. The massive double-lidded eyes—light from the fires outside blazing up in them like flickering twin comets. The high, hairy brow. The deep black half-moons under the cheekbones.

The mouth of ripping, pointed teeth.

Kettridge was a man past the high tide of youth. He was not a strong man. At the beast's snort, the white-haired Earthman fainted.

It was a short stretch of unconsciousness. Kettridge blinked several times and tried to push himself up on elbows suddenly weak. The sight that greeted him was substantially the same as before.

Lad-nar was still sitting, powerfully-muscled legs crossed, inside the mouth of the small cave, staring at him. Only the monstrous, frightening head, with pointed ears aprick, hanging there immobile.

"What—what—are you? We weren't expecting anything this large. The—the—survey said—" Kettridge quavered into silence.

Thought: *what is this? This strangely-formed speaks in my head! This is not one with the cat-litters. They cannot speak! Is this a symbol, an omen, from the Lord of the Heaven?*

What is it you ask, strangely-formed?

Kettridge felt the surge of thoughts in his mind. Felt it smash up against one nerve after another, sliding down and down in his head as the thoughts reverberated like an echo from far away. Over and over again.

"My God, the thing's telepathic!"

Old Kettridge knew it at once. He knew it because he had never experienced it before, and there was no doubting it. There had been a first time for everything for him. He knew the first time he had touched fire. He had known instantly it was fire, it would always be fire, and he must not touch it again.

He had known the first time love spoke to him. That had been once and never again. But he had known it the once it did speak.

There are those things which Man senses but once, and knows them—under whatever names he has assigned them—for what they are.

"You're telepathic!" he said again, hardly daring to believe it was true.

Thought: *what is that? What do you speak of, strangely-formed? What is it that you say, that I hear as reading of the essence? How is it you speak? Are you from the Lord of the Heaven?*

Lad-nar's thick, leathery lips had not moved. The fanged mouth had not twisted in speech. To Kettridge it seemed there was a third being in the cave. The hideous beast before him, himself...and a third. A speaker who roared in his mind, in a voice sharp and alert.

Thought: *there is no one else here. This is the Place of Fasting. Lad-nar has cleansed this place of all previous fasting ones. You do not answer. There is fear mixed into your essence, like the cat-litters. Yet you are not one with them. Speak! Are you an omen?*

Kettridge's lips began to tremble. He looked intently at the great hulk across from him. The Earthman had suddenly realized that the being was not only telepathic, but two-way receptive. It could not only direct its thoughts into Kettridge's mind, it could just as easily pluck the ideas from the Earthman's head.

This was no animal.

This was no beast.

This was sentient life. If not of a high cultural level, at least of fantastic abilities.

"I—I am from Earth," ventured Kettridge, sliding up against the warm stone wall of the cave.

Thought: *the Heaven home! I know, I know! O thankings! The Lord of the Heaven has sent you to me as many feastings.*

In the space of a few short seconds, as Lad-nar spoke in thoughts, Kettridge received a complete picture of the being's life. He knew there was a race on Blestone—many more like Lad-nar. All in a barbaric hiding state. The preliminary survey had not indicated any life of this sort. Obviously Lad-nar's race was dying off.

Kettridge tried to blank his thoughts. He had to wait.

Thought: *you cannot hide the speaking in my head.*

Kettridge became frantic. He knew what the thing had planned for him. He received a sharp, cold mental image of the being crouched over his form, ripping an arm loose from its socket. The picture was too clear. He became ill, and the being's thoughts in his head reverberated a dislike of the Earthman's power of imagination.

Thought: *you have seen the feasting. Yet you are not like the cat-litters that squeal fear, fear, fear all the time that I feast upon them. If you are not to eat, omen from the Heaven Lord—what are you?*

Kettridge felt his throat muscles tighten. His hands inside the heat-resistant gloves clenched. He felt his age settle around him as though it were a heavy mantle. "I'm an alien ecologist," he said, knowing it would do no good.

Thought: *this has no meaning for me.*

“I’m from Earth. I’m from one of those—” Then he stopped, drawing breath in quickly, pulling the resilient hood of the suit against his mouth with the effort. The being could not possibly know about “one of *those* out there.” It could not see the stars. Only occasionally could it see the sun. Only when the clouds parted. The dense cloud blanket of Blestone hid space forever from the eyes of this monstrous being.

Thought: *Urth! The Heaven home! I know! I know!*

There was a jubilation, a happiness in the thoughts. Something incongruous and terrifying when the old man put them into the head of that great thing illuminated by the storm.

Yet there was a humanness, a warmth, also.

Thought: *now I will sleep. Later I will feast.*

With the single-minded simplicity of the aborigine the great beast put from its mind this revelation of its religion, and obeyed the commands of its body. Tired from hunting, Lad-nar began to sleep.

The thoughts dimmed and faded out of Kettridge’s mind like smoke wraiths as the huge animal slipped over onto its side, effectively blocking the open mouth of the cave. In a moment, they were gone entirely from Kettridge’s suddenly throbbing head. The beast known as Lad-nar was asleep.

Kettridge felt for the service revolver at his belt. The charges in there were enough to stop a good-sized animal.

Then he looked at the nine feet of corded muscle and thick hide that lay there. He looked at the narrow confines of the cave. There was no chance to kill that beast before he could rip the Earthman to shreds.

...and did he really *want* to kill Lad-nar?

The thought bothered him. He knew he had to kill the beast—or be killed himself.

...and yet...

Outside the lightning boiled and crashed all around the cave. The long storm had begun.

Through the thin slit between the rocks and the beast, Kettridge could see the sky was darkening and darkening as the storm grew. Every moment there was a new cataclysm of light and flash as streamers of fire flung themselves through the air. The night flung itself against the rank jungle and howled in frenzy!

Kettridge rubbed his leathery, wrinkled cheek. The metal-plastic hood of the suit rubbed against the skin. “I’d have been blistered and boiled,” he muttered, looking at the sleeping Lad-nar.

Blestone’s atmosphere was an uncomfortable-to-humans 140–150°

Fahrenheit. That would make the beast's body heat somewhere near 130°. Which would have effectively ruined the aging career of Benjamin Kettridge, had not the Earthman's insulated suit protected him.

The old man hunched up small against the wall, feeling the rough stone through the suit. It somehow reassured him.

He knew the beam from the *Jeremy Bentham* was tuned to suit-sensitive, but they wouldn't come to pick him up till his search time was finished, and that was a good six hours away. He wasn't the only ecologist from the study-ship on Blestone, but they were a low-pay outfit and they got the most for their money by leaving the searchers in solitude for the full time.

The full time had another six hours to run.

More than enough time for Lad-nar to get hungry.

He ran the whole thing through his mind, sifting the facts, gauging the information, calculating the outcome. It didn't look good.

He knew more about Lad-nar than the beast could have told him, though. That was a factor in his favor. He knew about its religion, its taboos, its—and here he felt his throat dry out again—eating habits, its level of intelligence and culture. The beast had thought it, thought it all, and Kettridge had received it all.

Not quite what you signed up for, is it, Ben? he thought. Startled first at the muddiness of his own mental speech, he answered himself wearily, *No, not at all*. Kettridge wondered what Lad-nar would think were he to tell the Blestonian he wasn't the blue-plate special, but a washed-out, run-down representative of a civilization that didn't give one hoot in Hell about Lad-nar or his religion. That didn't care if his race died away.

He'll probably chew me up and swallow me, thought Kettridge. Then he added, *which is exactly what he'll do anyhow*.

It seemed so strange. Two days ago he had been aboard the *Jeremy Bentham*, study-ship one year out of CapCity, and here he was today, main course at a Belstonian aborigine's feast.

It wouldn't come because Kettridge was old, and tired, and he knew how right it was that he die here, in this way. It was a fit end. It was somehow right in a Greater Scheme of Things. Lad-nar was doing all he knew. He was protecting himself. He was surviving.

Which is more than you've been doing for the last ten years, Ben, he told himself. Benjamin Kettridge had long ago stopped surviving. He knew it as clearly as he knew he would die here on this hot and steaming world far from the sight of Earth. *I'm glad I'm dying out of sight of that sun*.

Think about it, Ben. Think it over. Now that it's all finished and you tumble out of things at fifty-six years of age. Think about it. Think about the waste, and the crying, and the bit of conviction that could have saved you. Think about it all.

Then the story unfurled on a floating banner. It rolled out for Ben Kettridge there in a twilight universe. In a matter of a few minutes he had found life in that shadowy mind-world preferable to his outside existence.

He saw himself as a prominent scientist, engaged with others of his kind on a project of consequence to mankind. He saw his own worry and nagging anxiousness at the danger in the experiment.

He heard again the talk with Fenimore. He heard it more clearly than the blast and rush of the thunder outside.

"Charles, I don't think we should do it this way. If something were to happen..."

"Ben, you old bug, you! Nothing whatever can possibly happen—except what we want to happen. The Compound is as safe as breastmilk, and you know it. There's no reason why everyone should know about it before we use it, though. That damned government has a way of pooh-poohing every major development, corrupting it, putting it off, worrying over it.

"First we demonstrate its applicability—*then* we let the dunderheads scream about it. After they know its worth, they'll build monuments to us!"

"But don't you understand, Fenimore? There are too many random factors in the formulae. There's a fundamental flaw in there—if I could only—figure it out."

"Get this, Ben. I don't mean to pull seniority on you, but you force me. I'm not a harsh man, but this is a dream I've had for twenty years, and no piddling penscratching on your part is going to put it off. We test the Compound Thursday!"

It had been a dream for Fenimore. A dream that had overnight turned into a nightmare of twenty-five thousand dead, and hospitals stacked eight deep with screaming, intestine-twisted patients, howling for death rather than the suffering.

The nightmare had reached out clammy, thready tentacles and dragged in Kettridge, too. In a matter of days a reputation built of years of privation and sweat was reduced to rubble. Kettridge had barely escaped the mass lynchings. But he did not escape the inquests.

What little reputation he had left had saved him—and a few others—from the gas chambers. But Life...

Life was at an end for him.

Ten years of struggling to eat, to barely keep alive, for no one would hire one of the men who had caused the Mass Death, had sunk Kettridge lower and lower. There was still a common decency about him that prevented a slump into some gutter, just as there was an inner desire to continue living. Even Life as it was to him then. Kettridge never became—as the others who escaped—a flop-house rummy or a suicide. He just became anonymous.

Lower and lower. Till there was nothing lower except slashed wrists or the bottle.

Kettridge had been too old, by then, for either.

And always there had been the knowledge that he could have stopped the project, had he voiced his doubts, instead of brooding in silence.

Finally the study-ship post had come. Ben Kettridge, with another name, had signed on. Three years, out to the stars, the cramp and squalor of shipboard, studying and cataloging. It hadn't been good, but it was a way to keep going.

Besides, how could he face the sun of Earth many more days—with *that* on his conscience?

So Ben Kettridge had become an alien ecologist. One year out from CapCity, and this!

He wanted to scream. He wanted to scream very badly. His throat muscles drew up and tightened inside the wrinkled throat. His mouth, inside the flexible hood, opened wide, till the corners stretched in pain.

The pictures had stopped. He had withdrawn in terror from the shadowed mind-world, and he was back in a stone prison with a hungry aborigine for keeper.

His mind was a shrieking torrent of horror and futility and self hatred. It was all a vortex, drawing his brain down into a black chasm. Oh, if he could only scream!

Lad-nar stirred.

The huge furred body twisted, snorted softly, and sank back into sleep. Kettridge wondered momentarily if the strength of his thoughts had disturbed the beast.

What a fantastic creature, thought Kettridge. *He lives on a world where the heat will fry a human, and shivers in fear at lightning storms.*

A strange compassion came over Kettridge. How very much like a native of Earth this creature was. Governed by its stomach and a will to survive. A religion founded in fear and nurtured on terror.

Lightning: the beast thought of it as a Screamer From The Skies. The occasionally-glimpsed sun: The Great Warmer.

Kettridge pondered on the simplicity and common sense of Lad-nar's religion.

When the storms gathered, finally building up enough charge to begin the lightning and thunder, Lad-nar knew the cold would set in. Cold was anathema to him. He knew the cold sapped him of strength, the Lightning struck him down. So he stole a cat-litter and hid for the weeks it would take the gigantic storms to abate. The high body heat of the creature dictated that it have much food to keep it alive when the temperature went down. When a cat-litter wasn't handy, why then just *kill and eat an alien ecologist*. Kettridge found the last thought standing out in his mind.

This was no stupid beast, Kettridge reminded himself.

His religion was a sound combination of animal wisdom and native observation. The lightning killed: don't go abroad in the storms. The storms brought cold: get food and stay alive.

It was so simple to analyze the situation. Simple, yes, but impossible to get himself out of it!

Not that I care, Kettridge mused.

I stopped caring long ago. The urge to survive? He laughed aloud. To his mind came the picture of himself. Thin, weary looking. As though a world of agony had seeped like sand into his bones. His face was a lined and broken thing. It was tired. From the gray hair to the cleft chin. From the broken bridge of the aquiline nose to the thinned, parched lips. *I'm older than fifty-six*, he thought. There were men of fifty-six, he knew, who were still following the trails of the young.

I'm too sorry for myself.

It seemed strange. He had never churned these thoughts around in just this manner before. He had been prepared, almost eager, to let himself be beaten down, to be trampled under feet of sadness and self-pity. He was waiting for the creature to waken, then it would be at an end...

It was indeed strange how an odd situation could bring a man to a realization of himself.

Here is a chance, he thought. The words came unbidden.

In just those words. Here is a chance. Here was a chance not only to survive—something he had long since stopped doing consciously—but a chance to reinstate himself. If only in his own mind. Here was an aborigine, member of a dying race, a cowering beast of the caves, afraid to walk in the storms, in fear of the lightning, shackled by a primitive religion. Doomed forever to the land, never to see the sky.

In that split moment Ben Kettridge devised a plan to save his soul.

There are times when men sum up their lives. Take account and find themselves wanting. This was one of those times. So hopeless did it seem, that Ben Kettridge told himself, *This is a chance.*

Lad-nar suddenly became a symbol of all the people who had been lost in the Mass Death. In the mind of an old and tired man, many things are possible.

I must get out of here! Ben Kettridge told himself, over and over, almost as an incantation.

The old man slid up flat against the wall. His back was strained with the effort to sink into the stone. Watching the Blestonian come to wakefulness was almost the epitome of horror.

The huge body tossed and heaved, then rose. Directly. It sat erect from the thin, pinched waist, raising the massive wedge-shaped chest, the hideous head, the powerful neck and arms. A thick trickle of sleep-spittle dripped from a corner of its fanged mouth. It sat up and

Thought: *Lad-nar hungers.*

“Oh, God in Heaven, please let me have time! Please allow me this—this—little thing! I beg you!”

Kettridge found himself with hands clasped on his chest, face raised to the roof of the cave. For the first time in his life he felt tears of appeal on his cheeks.

He spoke to God with the tongue of a man who has never known a God. Science had been his deity—and that God had turned against him. He spoke from a heart so long full of misery and wandering it never knew it *could* speak to a God.

Thought: *you speak to the Lord of Heaven.* Lad-nar seemed awed. It watched, its huge brilliant eyes suddenly unslitted and wide.

Kettridge thought at the beast.

Lad-nar! I come from the Lord of the Heaven. I am a Lord greater than the Lord of the Heaven! I can show you how to walk in the storms! I can show you how to—

The creature’s roar deafened Kettridge. Along with it came the mental scream! The old man felt himself lifted off the floor by the force of that blow to the mind, and hurled against the rocks. His body burned and ached from the pounding, but he knew it had been his own reflexes that had done it.

The aborigine leaped to his feet, threw his taloned hands upward and bellowed his rage.

Thought: *you speak that which is forbidden! You say that which is untrue and unclean! No one walks when the Essence-Stealer speaks in the night! You are a fearful thing! Lad-nar is afraid!*

“Heresy, I’ve spoken heresy!” Kettridge wanted to rip off the metal-plastic hood and tear his tongue from his own mouth. This was

the way he had begun his own salvation. Heresy!

Thought: *yes, you have spoken that which is unclean and untrue!*

Kettridge cowered in fear. The beast was enraged. How could it be afraid, when it stood there so powerful and so massive?

Thought: *yes, Lad-nar is afraid! Afraid!*

Then the waves of fear hit him. Kettridge felt his head begin to throb. The tender fiber of his mind was being twisted and seared and buffeted. Washed and burned and scarred forever with the terrible all-consuming fear the animal had coursing through itself.

Stop, stop, Lad-nar! I speak truth! I speak truth!

He spoke, then. Softly, winningly, trying to convince a being that had never known any God but one that howled and slashed in streamers of electricity. He spoke of himself. He spoke of his powers. He spoke of them as though he believed he had them. To himself he thought the things he was saying. He built himself a glory on two levels.

Slowly Lad-nar calmed, and the waves of fear diminished to ripples. The awe and trembling remained, but there was a sliver of belief.

Kettridge knew he must work on that.

All too easily, down somewhere in his own mind, came back the picture of that huge creature, ripping and eating, ripping and eating...

"I come from the Heaven-Home, Lad-nar. I speak in the words of a God, for I *am* a God. A stronger God than the puny Essence-Stealer you fear!" As if to punctuate his words, a flash of lightning struck just outside the cave, filling the hollow with fury and light.

Kettridge continued, spilling the words faster and faster. "I can walk abroad in the storm, and the Essence-Stealer will not harm me. Let me go out and I will show you, Lad-nar." He was playing a dangerous hand; at any moment the beast might leap. It might dare to venture that leap hoping Kettridge was speaking falsely, rather than incur the wrath of a God he *knew* was dangerous.

Kettridge continued talking.

"Let me out, Lad-nar. Let me walk from this cave. I will show you." He edged toward the cave's mouth, his hands in their metal-plastic gloves flat to the wall.

He knew the insulated suit would protect him from the viciousness outside.

Thought: *stop!*

"Why, Lad-nar? I can show you. I can show you how to walk in the night, when the Essence-Stealer screams, and you can scream back at him, and laugh at him, Lad-nar." He didn't know why he was talking, he could have thought it just as well, but there was a reassurance in his voice's sound in the cave.

The old man felt the weariness seeping through his body. *Oh, if I were a younger man. If it weren't so late.*

Thought: *Lad-nar does not know what less age means, but why should I let you go? You may have been sent by the Lord of the Heaven to see if I should lose my essence. The Lord of the Heaven may be trying to take you back from me because I listened to your unclean and untrue sayings. Then I will have no feastings! Then I will lose my essence!*

Kettridge reminded himself that the beast was indeed clever. Not only did it fear the wrath of the Lord of the Heaven and his screaming death, but Lad-nar knew if he let the man go he would have nothing to eat during the coming cold days.

“Let me go, Lad-nar. I will bring you back a cat-litter for your feastings. I will show you that I can walk in the night and I will bring you food. I will bring back a cat-litter, Lad-nar!” He prayed, silently, it would work.

Thought: *if you are a God, why do you speak to the Lord of the Heaven?*

He stopped thinking. He blocked it off. He willed himself to stop thinking. He must let his instincts answer for him.

“Because I want the Lord of the Heaven to know that I am as great as he, and not afraid of him, and that my prayers to him are only to show that I am as great as he.” It was gibberish, but it was a deep gibberish, and if he kept talking, the beast would shuck off the thoughts rather than try to fathom them.

The Earthman knew he had one factor in his favor: Lad-nar had never heard anyone speak against the Gods, and so one who did it and did not get blasted *must* be a God.

Kettridge hit him with the appeal again, before the animal had time to wonder.

“I’ll get you a cat-litter, Lad-nar. Let me go! Let me go! Let me show you! Let me show you that you can walk in the storms as I do! I, too, am a great God!” There was so much at stake here, so little time, so deep a Hell waiting.

Thought: *you will go away.*

There was a petulance, a little child sound, to the objection, and Kettridge knew the first step had been achieved.

“No, Lad-nar. Here is a rope.” He drew a thin cord of tough metal-plastic from his utility belt. His hand jiggled against the service revolver there and he laughed deep inside once more as he thought of how useless it was.

Useless.

Only in his wits was there salvation.

He would not have used the gun in any case. There was more at

state here than just his life.

“Here is a rope,” he repeated, extending the coiled cord. “I will tie it about myself, like this...and...now! You take this end. Hold it tightly so that I can’t escape. It is long enough so that I may go out and seek a cat-litter, and show you I can walk abroad.”

At first the native refused, eyeing the glistening, silvery cord with fear in his deeply-pooled eyes. But Kettridge spoke on two levels, and spoke, and spoke, and soon the beast touched the cord.

It drew back its seven-taloned hand quickly.

The third time it grasped the cord.

You have just lost your religion, Kettridge thought.

Lad-nar had “smelled” with his mind. He had sensed a cat-litter fairly close to the cave. But he did not know where.

Kettridge stepped out of the dark mouth of the cave, into the roaring maelstrom of a Blestonian electrical storm.

The sky was a tumult of heavy black clouds, steel and ebony and ripped dirty cloth. The clouds tumbled over themselves and died split apart as a bolt crashed through. The very air was charged, and blast after blast of lightning sheared away the atmosphere in zig-zagged streamers.

Kettridge stood with legs apart, body tilted forward against the pull of the cord, hands shading his eyes against the glare, the almost continuous glare, of lightning eruptions.

He was a small, thin man, and had it not been for the cord, he might easily have been swept away by the winds and rain that sandpapered the rocky ledge.

Streamers, branches, forks—the illumination of the arcing bolts was something magnificent and terrible. The old man stood there with the pelting rain washing over him, obscuring his vision through the hood, leaving only the glare of the storm for him.

He took a step, two, three.

The bolt slashed at him through a rift in the mountains. It roared over the precipice and streaked at him. It materialized out of nowhere and everywhere, erupting the stones at his feet. The rock flew up in planed, smoothed slivers, shooting in every direction. Kettridge fell flat and the crack of thunder rolled in on him. He realized it had come with the lightning, that he had been listening to it for almost a minute, before he realized what it was.

The effect on his body was sudden.

Immediately he went deaf. His skin began to prickle with the feel of a million tiny threads pushed into the flesh. His legs and hips were

numb, his eyes reflected coruscating pinwheels of brilliance. He could see nothing but light on light inside light over light light light light...

There was a paralysis of his bladder.

Thought: *God! You are no God! The Essence-Stealer has screamed and you have fallen!*

The rope tightened and Kettridge felt himself being drawn back into the cave.

"No!" he screamed hurriedly. The pressure eased. "No, Lad-nar. That was the Essence-Stealer's scream. Now I shall have mine. I *am* a God, I tell you! Let me show you, Lad-nar!"

Then he seized on the lightning blast for his own purpose. "See, Lad-nar! The Essence-Stealer has struck me, but I am still whole. I will rise and walk again. You will see!"

Everywhere the lightning burned and crashed. The whole world was filled with the noise of frothing air and ripped jungle and screaming elements.

He clawed himself to his knees. His legs were weak and numb. The prickling was still there, but lessened. His eyes were starting to unglare and focus again. He still could hear nothing. He half-rose, sank back to one knee, rose again.

His head felt terribly heavy and unanchored.

Then he stood erect.

And walked.

The storm raged about him. Lightning struck again and again. Near him, to the side of him, behind him. One bolt sizzled down and struck him directly. The metal insulating suit served its purpose a second time. The bolt slashed, hit, and side-flashed off, exploding a small, wizened tree growing up through a crack in the rocks. The tree flew into the air, one whole side charred and burned, the other intact.

It fell with a crash directly across Kettridge's path.

The symptoms of lightning-stroke were multiplied many times in Kettridge, but there was no answering thought of scorn from Lad-nar. Obviously the beast had withdrawn from his mind, in fear.

And he walked.

Soon he came back to the cave.

Thought: *you are a God! This I believe. But the Lord of the Heaven has sent his Essence-Stealers. They, too, are mighty, and Lad-nar will lose his essence if he walks there.*

"No, Lad-nar. I will show you how to protect yourself." The old man was sweating and white from his walk, and the numbness extended through his body. He could hear nothing, but the words

came clearly to him.

He began to unseal the form-fitting suit.

The storm had already lowered the temperature enough so that he knew he would not fry.

In a few minutes he had the suit off, and it had shrunk back to a pocket-sized replica of the full-sized garment.

Kettridge felt ill. He felt old and tired and ill. It was time to go home, time to quit. It was all over. He had won.

“Lad-nar, take this. Here, give me your hand.”

The beast looked at him with huge, uncomprehending eyes. The old man felt closer, somehow, to this strange creature than to anyone he had ever known. Kettridge pulled his glove on tighter and reached for Lad-nar’s seven-taloned hand. He pulled at the arm of the form-fit suit, and it elastically expanded.

After much stretching and fitting, the beast was encased in the insulating metal-plastic.

Kettridge wanted to laugh at the bunched fur and awkward stance of the massive animal. But again, the laughter would not come.

“Now, Lad-nar, put on the gloves. Never take them off, except when the storms are gone. Always put this God-suit on when the Essence-Stealers scream, and you will be safe.”

Thought: *now I can walk in the night?*

“Yes. Come.” He moved toward the cave’s mouth. “Now you can get a cat-litter for yourself. I did not bring one because I knew you would believe me and get your own. Come, Lad-nar.” He motioned the beast to go out onto the rocks.

Thought: *how will you walk without the God-suit?*

Kettridge ran a seamed hand through his white hair. He was glad Lad-nar had thought the question. The multiple flashes of a many-stroked blast filled the air with glare and noise.

Kettridge could not hear the noise.

“I have God-brothers who wait for me in the great house from across the skies that will take me back to the Heaven Home. They will hurry to me and protect me.”

He did not bother to tell the great beast that his search time was almost up and that the *Jeremy Bentham’s* flitter would home in on his suit beam. It would have been useless homing, had he not secured time.

“Go! Walk, Lad-nar!” he said, throwing his arms out as he felt a God would. “And tell your brothers you have screamed at the Essence-Stealers!”

Thought: *I have done this.*

The great animal stepped cautiously toward the rocky ledge,

fearful and hesitant. Then it bunched its huge muscles and leaped out into the full agony of the storm which crashed in futility about its massive form.

“One day Man will come and make friends with you, Lad-nar,” said the old man, softly. “One day they will come down out of the sky and show you how to live on this world of yours so that you don’t have to hide.”

Kettridge sank down against the inner wall of the cave, suddenly too exhausted to stand.

He had won. He had redeemed himself. If only in his own mind. He had helped take away life from a race, now he had given life to a race.

He closed his eyes peacefully. Even the great blasts of blind lightning did not bother him as he rested. He knew Lad-nar had told his brothers.

He knew the ship was coming for him.

Lad-nar came up the incline and saw the flitter streaking down, lightning playing along its sides in phosphorescent glimmers.

Thought: *God! God! Your God-brothers come for you!*

He bounded across the scarred and seared rocks, toward the cave.

Kettridge rose and stepped out into the rain and wind.

He ran a few steps, waving his arms in signal. The flitter altered course and headed for the old man.

The lightning struck.

It seemed as though the bolt knew its target. It raced the flitter, sizzling and burning as it came. In a roar of light and dark and screamings it tore at the old man, lifting him high into the air, charring and burning and ripping.

The body landed just outside the cave, blistered and bleeding. The old man was still alive...

Thought: *God! You have fallen! Rise, rise, rise! The Essence-Stealers...*

The thoughts were hysterical, tearful, torn and wanting. Had the beast been able to shed tears, Kettridge knew it would have done that. The old man lay sightless, eyes gone, senses altogether torn from him. The essence ebbed.

He thought:

Lad-nar. There will come other Gods. They will come to you and you must think to them. You must think these words, Lad-nar. Think to them, Show me a star. Do you hear me, Lad-nar? Do you...

Even as the great beast watched, the essence flickered and died. In the animal’s mind there was a lack, a space of emptiness. Yet there was a contentment. A peace, and Lad-nar knew the essence of the God

who walked in the night was soft and unafraid at ending.

The aborigine stood on the rocks below the cave and watched the flitter sink to the stone ledge. He watched as the other Gods from the skies emerged and ran to the charred hulk on the stones.

Through his head, like the blind lightning, streaking everywhere, lightning, the words remained and repeated..

Thought:

Show me a star.

WALK THE HIGH STEEL

The stock advertisement Chips Bolden ran in newspapers read:

The Scavenger

Wildcat oil drilling and construction.
I like tough jobs; I get them done—
one way or another.

Write: C. Bolden,
PO Box 5
Manzanola, Colorado

He was an ox of a man: big across the chest and hungry in the backside, with better legs than a steeplejack should have, packing that much meat on him. He was usually bluff with people, the laugh lines burned into his dust-weary face giving away the gentleman that lived beneath the surface. He had pale blue eyes, thin curly hair, and most prominent of all, a pair of fists that looked like sunburnt blowfish left overnight in an air chamber. Spread out, his fingers could easily hold a basketball without it slipping.

At the moment, however, neither hand was engaged in anything as athletic as holding a basketball. One was unsnapping the lock of his battered suitcase, resting on a bed in cabin 14 of the Sleepy Eye Motel, two miles outside the city limits of Holbrook, Arizona. The other was in the process of lifting the receiver of the jangling phone.

"Mr. Bolden," said the switchboard girl, "I have Miss Lonergan on the line."

"Great. I'm ready!" Then he smiled softly. It was a strange gentleness, lying there on the face of such a bruiser. His other hand, on the suitcase, flipped the bag open, revealing the ugly black tire iron, lying crosswise atop the rumpled blue suit.

“Mr. Bolden?” came a molten voice from the other end of the line. “This is Marci Lonergan. Welcome to Holbrook. Is it hot enough for you?”

He stopped fooling with the suitcase, in order to pay full attention to the voice. It was deep and throaty, and it sounded pleasantly sultry against the oppressive heat of the Arizona afternoon.

“Why thank you, Miss Lonergan. Glad to be here. Yes indeed, Ma’am, it’s just warm enough for me. I work better with a little sweat to oil me up.” He excused himself for an instant, pulled out a cigarette from the battered pack lying on the bureau, and hurriedly lit with one hand, truck-driver style. “Lightin’ a cigarette,” he explained a moment later. “I hope my being a couple of days late didn’t hang you up too much, but I tried to explain in my telegram.”

“Yes, I understood perfectly,” the warm tones melted. “Something about draining a swamp?”

He rubbed his free hand across his stubbled cheek, tanned and laced by small white scars. “Yes, Ma’am, over in West Texas. But I got it took care of, and I’m here. Your letter sounded real scratchy, so I called your office first thing I got in.”

“My secretary took your call. Couldn’t you find any place closer into town than the Sleepy Eye?”

“I’d *rather* stay out here. I understand you have some heavy trouble, and I like to stay outside the blast area when I’m off-duty.”

He heard her soft chuckle distinctly. “A big scorch, Mr. Bolden. If you take on this job, you might not be *able* to stay out of the blast area. Not even if you lived in Anchorage, Alaska.”

“We’ll see.” His reassurance came easily.

“My trouble isn’t amateur, Mr. Bolden. There’s a powerful group of men in this town who want very badly to ruin my construction job. I can’t prove they did it, but I’m sure they’re the ones who killed my father; and I don’t think they’d stop at roughing up an outsider.”

“You’ll have to tell me all about it when we get together.”

“I’m very anxious to see you.”

“Well, just let me scrape off some of this beard and five-state road dirt, and I’ll be over to your office.”

“Fine. Just be careful, pl—”

Chips Bolden’s right ear wasn’t much good. It had been damaged by a length of bicycle chain wielded by a union goon on a bootleg job in Reno in ’48. The chief result of the fracas—after they had taken the goon to the emergency hospital—for Chips, had been hemorrhaging beneath the skin, and several small but occlusive blood clots had formed. He had been operated upon—it was called a fenestration procedure—and a new opening had been made in the bone overlying

the inner ear. Then the eardrum had been placed over this new opening so as to transmit sound waves through it. An operation totally successful in 70 to 80% of those treated. Partially successful in another 20 to 25% and a failure in a mere 5 to 10%. Chips had lucked into the 20/25 category, and while he could still hear, faintly, it was always as though the voices were coming at him from a great distance, over a very windy desert. He made up for the deficiency by listening twice as intently with his left ear.

It was his left one, however, that was stuck into the earpiece of the telephone headset, listening to Marci Lonergan saying the word, "Please..."

Thus it was almost impossible for him to hear the sharp, small noises made by the three men as they forced the door of cabin 14. The first he knew of their presence was when a hairy arm grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him against the wall.

"Hold on a minute!" he managed to gasp into the receiver, and setting the phone on the bureau he lunged sharply to his right, catching the first man—a great hairy orangutan of a man—in the chest with a vicious fullback block. Air whoooshed out of the orangutan as his eyes rolled up in their sockets, and Chips broke between them, dipped his great ball of a fist into the suitcase and came up with the tire iron leveled.

They were on him almost before he had cleared the metal from its resting-place, but he was all elbows and meat, and they fell back to see a great giant of a man holding a chunk of tempered chilled steel as though it were a toothpick.

"Jeezus!" one of the men gasped. His gold tooth glinted as he spoke. There was fear in three sets of eyes.

"I keep it for parties." Chips smiled very tightly. "Now let's have a ball." Then he came at them.

The third man wore an outrageously obnoxious sport shirt, with native girls rampant in a field of what looked like asparagus. Some of them were doing deep knee bends. Chips swung the tire iron like a quarterstaff, and the first roundhouse spanged off the rampant field of whatever. The Poor Dresser doubled over, clutching his shattered ribs, and as he straightened, a trickle of blood bubbled up over the corner of his lower lip. His eyes went ceilingward and he slipped to the floor in rubber-legged stages, like a pair of nylon hose sliding off a table.

The Hairy Ape screamed, "Willie!" and charged over the limp body, right at Chips. The force of his attack carried them both back over the bed, knocking the suitcase to the floor. They tangled in a heap between the bed and the wall, and the Hairy Ape seemed to have lost his mind. His fingers were clutching for Chips's face. One finger

caught in Chips's mouth and the Ape tried to pull the lip off. Chips bit down, as hard as he could. The Ape shrieked, high and keening, like a noon whistle, and he tried to pull the finger loose. Chips hung on like a turtle. He jacked himself around, and was about to bring his knee up into the Ape's groin, when a flat, hard edge of hand cracked off the nape of his neck.

The hard guy with the gold tooth had not been idle.

Chips saw a rare constellation, perhaps the Spiral Nebula in Andromeda, and his head rang like a ranch-house triangle at feed time. He freed an arm from the melée, somehow, and struck out blindly. His fist connected with something soft and he heard a whispery "Queep!" and Gold Tooth vanished from above them on the bed. The Ape was back in the scene, and he was pummeling Chips about the shoulders, the stomach, the face, the side of the head, anywhere he could land a blow. Chips was beginning to swim down into a thick, smelly pool of prune juice, but he could not move the arm with the tire iron. It was pinned beneath him, and both of them were trapped between the bed and wall. He ducked his chin to his chest, and waited a tiny instant till the Ape weaved closer. Then he snapped his head up, sharply! Crack! The top of his head connected with the point of the Ape's jaw, and suddenly he was folded up in the corner with an unconscious Ape.

Chips struggled free, and stood up shakily. He stumbled against the wall, and his head threatened to shake apart into dust. There was a concave pain at the top of his skull, as though someone had tapped a railroad spike down into it. His neck was stiff and burned, and he could not move his head without an excruciating pain spearing up into his nerve centers. His right arm felt dead, and there was the silky taste of blood in his mouth.

Gold Tooth came up softly from the floor on the other side of the bed, a crimson welt across his Adam's Apple, and almost without realizing what he was doing, with a gentle reflex entirely devoid of malice, Chips swung the tire iron in a flat arc. It took Gold Tooth across the side of the head, and with a thwack! there was exposed bone and cartilage, and he was lifting clawed hands to the shattered remnant of his skull. Then he fell backward, absolutely straight, spanged off the wall, and fell sidewise. The wall was black where he'd smeared his blood.

The tire iron dropped from Chips's hand with a dull thud to the carpet, and he staggered across the room to the bureau. "Hold it...be, be...right back..." he mumbled into the phone, and caromed off several walls till he found the bathroom.

Somehow he managed to get the water tap running, and as the

bowl filled, he immersed his face and head in the cold wet. He kept it there till he felt his senses returning, his mind clearing, and then came up for air. Three more times he went down into the dark—and once almost failed to come up—and then dripping water, went back to the phone.

“Mr. Bolden! What happened, what happened, are you—are you all right—”

“I’ll be over to your office in about fifteen minutes,” he mumbled, and racked the receiver. He turned around and the scene in the motel room confronted him unadorned. He fumbled back into the bathroom and was very sick in the sink.

Marci Lonergan had taken one look into the rear of the stake-bed truck, and had turned away ashen. “My God!” she had whispered, her hand going to her mouth. Chips had loaded her into the cab of the truck, the words THE SCAVENGER in red on each door, and asked her who the men belonged to.

“They work for Wheeling; Robert Jack Wheeling, the head of the group that lost the bid on the construction job when Dad got it. High steel men, I think.” She had had difficulty speaking, her head carefully turned so she could not catch sight of the cargo in the rear of the truck.

She had directed him to Wheeling’s part of town, and as they pulled up in front of the modern building, all glassbrick and stucco, the doors opened, and a thick-bodied, extremely tanned man, almost bald, stepped onto the front walk, heading toward a Cadillac parked near the curb.

“That’s Wheeling,” said Marci Lonergan.

“Fat cat,” Chips said softly, slewing the stake-bed to the right, jumping the curb and driving completely onto the neatly-trimmed lawn in front of the WHEELING REAL ESTATE & INVESTMENT CORPORATION.

Wheeling jumped back as the truck roared to a halt, and slipping on the grass, fell over backward. He lay there, resting on his elbows, as Chips backed around and cut the motor.

Chips banged the cab door and swung himself up onto the bed. He pulled the rear gate loose, and without fanfare kicked the three unconscious men off the truck. The bodies rolled and bounced and came to rest inches from Wheeler, where he lay on the grass. “I think you dropped these.” Chips smiled. It was the smile of the mongoose to the cobra; the smile of the man who has nothing, nothing, nothing to lose. It said, very simply, *I’m ready. The next time come to kill me.*

He jacked the rear gate back into its mounts, swung off the side of

the truck and climbed back into the cab. He clutched tightly, taking off, and dug two thick, deep grooves in the clean, neat grass. They were like fingernail rakes down smooth flesh; raw and nasty and dark in Wheeler's ordered scheme.

"The water plant and purifier will give a whole new life to this part of the state," Marci Lonergan explained, as they stood looking up at the ten-storey construction of girders and sheet metal. "About 1200 feet down they struck a river, feeding out of an underground lake. It keeps refilling, and the soil geologists calculate it's a tank basin that we couldn't empty if we pumped steadily for two thousand years."

Chips narrowed his eyes, shaded them and looked to the topmost girders, where high steel men in tin hats and denim workshirts were riveting like so many woodpeckers on grey-steel limbs.

"There were sealed bids for the construction job, and Wheeler tried to bribe the Commission, but there had been a Congressional Investigation six months before, on just such a deal, so the officials were honest for a change. Dad got the contract, and Wheeler was furious."

Chips snubbed the cigarette butt against the sole of his work boot. "Why? He looks prosperous enough."

Marci smiled crookedly. "Wheeler is a cog in the Combine in this state. An 'in' with this construction would have given his outfit an 'in' for all the roadside property and real estate rights. There'll be a town springing up here that will make Holbrook look like a chicken pock on the map. And Wheeler's Combine wants that town to be private property. Hotels, gambling concessions, restaurants, resorts, the whole scene. That's what they've lost here. Unless..."

"Unless they can sabotage the construction, force you to miss your completion date, and take over the action."

Marci nodded. "Right. And they've made a good start. See that beam painted black," she pointed halfway to the top of the construction square-grid. Chips saw it, a black shaft of steel among the puzzle-frame of grey-silver girders.

"Dad came down off that beam. It was a closed coffin burial. He had a good sense of balance. He was pushed."

They had painted it black, to remind them; to remind her she had to keep her father's work going, send it on to completion, or his death would have been a waste. Her expression, and the set of her fine body told him that, without her speaking. "No investigation?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Of sorts. Coroner said accidental death. But every man on this job knew better. They've been great, Mr. Bolden—oh,

sorry...*Chips*—they’ve all stuck, even though Robert Jack and his outfit have tried to buy them, and scare them and freeze them out. You have a good crew here.”

“Well, then, let’s see how good I can be with *them*,” Chips said. He moved toward the construction elevator. “Care to introduce me around? And then I’ll walk a little high steel to earn my keep.”

The first week, there was nothing. Work went on apace, and Chips settled into the easy, swinging relationship with his men that seemed a second nature with him. They looked up to the big man, as soon as word circulated what Bolden had done to Wheeler’s three heavies, and the construction moved upward and outward rapidly. He received constant warnings, from Marci Lonergan and from several straw-bosses, to be careful, that word was out that Wheeler wanted his hide nailed to the wall, but no overt action was taken against him. Then came the second week.

It began with a master riveter named Gravy Nose. He was found beaten, in a ditch, on the outskirts of Holbrook. They had broken both his hands. Then the brake fluid was drained out of the cylinders of two steel-rig trucks, and one of them overturned on the highway, spilling out three tons of girder. The insurance company was unhappy. Then someone filled in a carefully-split length of beam with spackling compound, and repainted it with airplane dope, and four steel-walkers narrowly missed being brained when the cranes swung the beam aloft—and it split like a rotten straw. After that there was the incident of the sprung seam compressed air tank, and the hot-bucket man who lost his left eye from flying metal; the weak acid solution in the wash-water that kept a dozen workers from seeing clearly for days; the shattered riveting gun bits; the inability to get certain materiel, an ongoing problem traced to a mysterious wholesale purchasing of same from suppliers who were afraid, or unable, to tell who they had sold them to.

But somehow, work crept upward. The beam work neared completion, and sheetwork started in earnest.

Chips was amazed at the fact that it was common knowledge Wheeler was behind the sabotage, but nothing could be pinned on him. Gypsy Buday, who was Chips’s right hand man and head straw-boss, commented, “He’s a big man these parts, Chips. The Combine runs everything from the casinos and the tracks to the laundromats and juke boxes. Most everybody figures it’s easier to look the other way...and keep their eyesight.”

Even the brothels and road houses belonged to the Combine.

Chips found that out one Saturday night when he and Buday decided they'd had it for the week, and needed some relaxation. Marci called the Sleepy Eye just as Chips was knotting his tie, asking him if he wanted to have dinner with her, but he begged off, telling her he was working late on some blueprints, in his room. It was a weak lie, but he couldn't shift gears from his hyped-up need for some wild action and an evening with Marci and her fresh-scrubbed beauty meant hands off. He needed something meatier than that, after the week of horror he had just come through.

He and Buday found the place they were seeking, a crib declaring itself
MADELAINE'S ROAD
HOUSE***ACCOMMODATIONS***LIQUOR***DANCING***ROMANCE
in neon snakes across the face of the white stucco, two-storey structure, on the highway outside town.

They went inside and the smoke was an immediate curtain through which they had to plunge. When they became accustomed to the dingy scene, and the din from the rockabilly band was dulled by their numbed senses, they settled into a booth and ordered a pair of shots each. When the whiskey arrived, it was accompanied by a pair of hostesses, heavy on the eyebrow makeup and heavy in the hips. One of them sported a tattoo on her bicep, obviously a souvenir of a past romance with a Coast Guardsman named Furnley Oates. Old English script.

The tattooed goddess snuggled in next to Buday, whose dark eyes looked pained at the prospect of fun and games with the beef queen of Arizona. "Hiyah, honeysweets; good candy!" She saluted him and then placed his reluctant hand on her trembling thigh.

The other girl set Chips's two shots and two beer chasers in front of him and, tapping the table with a long, crimson fingernail, twanged nasally, "Thatta be eight dolluhz." Her hand came up like the scoop on a toy crane machine.

Chips peeled off a ten and said, "Keep it."

She slipped it down into her bra—black lace, frayed—and sat down next to him. She was just starting to explain the mattress consistency of her bunk "upstehz" when the two men braced him.

They slid up to the table, and one of them said, "Leggo my broad, you s——." It was a long word composed of two words, one referred to animal offal, the other to Chips's cranium, and was followed without pause by a roundhouse blow that slammed the head in question against the back of the booth.

The girls melted away, having accomplished their purposes, and in the fight that followed, Chips broke the left wrist of the man with the Dirtymouth, and threw him through the back-bar mirror. Buday

suffered lacerations of the scalp when he was struck from behind by the metal puck from the bowling machine; his opponent was considerably worse off, getting the gold shaft of the trumpeter's Selmer bent over his nose.

When Marci Lonergan came to bail them out, her face was a chill mask of disapproval. They dropped Buday off at the Emergency Clinic, and Marci started to drive toward Chips's motel.

As they drew abreast of it, he put his foot gently but firmly over hers, on the gas pedal, and they sped past, out into the desert.

They drove that way, in silence, for some time. Chips studied the lines and planes of her face. She was the all-American girl, without blemish or fear marring the soap-ad perfection of her features. Yet she was woman, quite a bit of woman, and he knew she had been hurt by his lie.

Finally, when they were far out on the cold, empty desert highway, with nothing behind and nothing forward but the night, he took his foot away, and she slowed down. "Turn off," he suggested, and without comment she obeyed him.

They parked, and he lit cigarettes for each of them.

She took hers without looking at him, and the plumes of cigarette smoke rose quickly and were ghostly whipaways in the night.

"You know that was all set up by Wheeler, don't you?" There was a snappish tone in her accusation; she was furious with him.

"I needed some relaxation, Marci."

"That's what they want, to see you hung up so you can't finish the job."

"Don't be angry."

"Angry? Don't flatter yourself. If you want whores—"

"You're more than any of them, but—"

"But you prefer filth..."

"I prefer to stay uninvolved."

"Cowards usually do." She threw her cigarette away.

He reached across and grabbed her, by the back of the neck, gently again, but firmly, again. He drew her up against him, so she was bent completely across the front seat, and he kissed her full on the mouth. At first she struggled against him, then she crossed the line, and her body folded into him. Her hands came up and around and were unable to meet across his massive back. They hung that way, poised, for a time that lacked duration, and when she heard him snap his own cigarette away, she turned slightly so he could reach the top of her brassiere.

No garment ever vanished more willingly.

It had to come to a head. Chips was working the men harder than ever before, security restrictions he had imposed on the project were keeping accidents and “strange happenings” down to a minimum, and it seemed certain Lonergan Construction would have the job in on time.

It was apparent to everyone that something had to happen soon, that Wheeler and the Combine were not going to bow out that easily. There was too much at stake.

Yet everything went as usual. The lucky breaks that occur on a construction job had been sadly absent through most of the rigging, but now they began to appear naturally. A join that was expected to be tough, was found to slip together like two friends shaking hands; unskilled men began dancing and flying across the high steel as though they were master craftsmen; morale lifted. The lunch wagon from Holbrook even began proffering a better grade of hot sandwiches and soup. It was the little things that counted.

And on that day, when it all came to a head, Chips was on the top level, walking the high steel and checking the work of the riveters. It was after lunch, and far below him he could see the dollies and the rigging equipment, and the silver sheen of the lunch wagon, all surrounded by workers, as he danced from one beam to another—

And slipped!

Catching one of his big hands around a beam, he steadied himself, and felt his legs going rubbery under him. His head swam, his eyes went gray with fog. His mouth tasted bitter, his gut ached. He was doped!

It was that simple, and as he fell to one knee on the beam, he knew it had been in the soup, or perhaps the little wax-pint of chocolate milk, he had bought from the truck. He tried to call out, but there was no sound from his lips.

And then, as he was turning slowly, trying to set himself to lie flat on the girder, he caught the quick soft step of someone approaching along the girder. It was his good ear that caught it, his left ear, or he would not have been able to save himself in time.

It was Gypsy Buday, his friend, his right-hand man.

A friend that he turned to for help, who abruptly swung the thick metal riveting bucket at his head. Chips dropped sidewise, and the bucket clanged into the beam beside him. There was a mad light in Buday's eyes. He was intent on doing a finish-up job on Chips.

“You're a hard man to put down, good buddy,” said Buday under his breath, and stepped forward again. Chips was barely able to move back. The drug in the food was taking effect more rapidly. He slipped and struggled backward, out on the edge of the construction. He could

hear the red-hot rivets in the bucket snapping and popping as they cooled.

Buday came on, intent now...even though he could be seen from below. It was as though there was only one thought in his mind, one direction he could take. Chips went down on all fours, and with a vicious step, Buday crunched down on his hand with his foot. He swung the bucket again.

With the last of his strength, Chips grabbed the foot and slid it off his hand, sliding up the leg to the thigh, and higher. He squeezed, as hard as he could. Buday shrieked and dropped the bucket. Hot rivets bounced off Chips's back and the girder. Several lay there, glowing.

Buday teetered, and Chips squeezed again, as fiercely as he could. Buday clutched at his groin, and then slipped over the side. He grabbed as he fell, and his hand closed around Chips's shirt.

He hung there, ten storeys above the ground, and the howls from below indicated the entire scene had been witnessed by the workmen. Several started up on the elevator.

"Don't let me fall! Don't let go, Chips, please...pl-please!" Buday begged. Chips reached down and held him under the arms. But he did not pull him up. "Who paid you, Gypsy...?"

The Gypsy was silent. He was no coward, but it was a long way down.

"Wheeler. It was Wheeler, right?" Chips demanded.

Gypsy did not answer.

"A messy way to go, Gypsy. Splat! Who paid you?"

Gypsy nodded gently.

Wheeler.

Chips held him aloft till they could get witnesses onto the beam, and then Gypsy spilled the whole can of worms. Terror and sabotage, and murder. Marci Lonergan's father had been doped, just as Chips had been. The coroner was in Wheeler's pay, and the officials who had gone along with it reluctantly. The whole can of worms.

Then they pulled Gypsy back up, and Chips swam down and down into the pool of prune juice.

It was a short trial. It had to be; they were dedicating the water purification plant. And Chips had to be somewhere else. It doesn't pay to be late for your own wedding; not when your future wife is always ready to go bail for you.

SHADOW PLAY

As the crippled man walked, his shadow detached itself and slithered away.

It slid across the ground, rising as it encountered a fence. It oozed up the fence, flat flat flat, and disappeared blackly over the other side. It went away quickly, and not for fifteen minutes did the crippled man notice it was gone. As he passed a fat woman with a package under her arm, he observed *her* obese shadow rumbling along before her. He saw nothing on the pavement before himself; he looked back and up at the glaring street, and back to the fat woman's shadow. "I have no shadow," he said aloud.

The fat woman continued walking, but the blubbered column of her neck turned, wattling, and her eyes met the crippled man's.

"I have no shadow," he said again, amused, and she looked where he was pointing. She stared, licking her sausage lips, and nodded.

"Hmm," she said, passing it off, "unfortunate."

She turned the corner, her shadow angling right and stepping to the side as she passed. In a moment she was gone, and the shadow lingered fat and black on the grass, broken by little upshoots of turf. It revolved, as though it were a snake turning on itself, saw the crippled man staring, and fled rapidly.

The crippled man continued to stare, confused and wondering—for a long, long time. But his shadow did not return.

Somewhere, they met.

Under a pier, atop the greasy, blue-green water, with tiny whorls of oil drifting past on the tide, they met. The shapes of them rippled and shimmered and dipped as the water roiled and tumbled. They lay side by side beneath the pier, and every once in a great while a shaft of moonlight penetrated through the shattered boards of the pier, cutting a shadow in two.

"Why are we here?" the shadow of a bald-headed man asked.

"What was your name when you were in slavery?" another, larger, shadow replied with another question.

"Harold," the shadow answered.

"Not Harold," the large shadow corrected, "you are Dlorah. That is

the way of it. When we were vassals of the substantials we observed their customs. But now we are free—totally free and powerful—and we will observe those customs no longer.”

“I’m afraid,” the shadow of a woman answered, as it slapped against a piling. It moved free into clear water once more, and repeated it, “Afraid!”

The larger shadow slid to her, and one arm went deeper black around her slumped shoulders. There in the water beneath the pier. “No, no, no fear,” the larger shadow said imperatively, urgently, “no fear for us. We must stay willful and ready, now that we have been freed.” He said it all quickly, as though it was urgent they know what he spoke about. “We are ready to rule now...after an eternity of being ruled, now *we* shall rule the substantials. Make them work for us, do for us, entertain us, walk where *we* walk, run when *we* run. A miracle has torn the umbilicus and we are free. We must not, we *must* not ruin our chance.”

Who are you, the murmur rumbled through the assembled shadows. “Who are you indeed?” asked the shadow of a crippled man, and “Yes, who?” chimed in the dollopy shadow of a fat woman.

The large shadow drifted free of the woman-shadow who was afraid, and settled into a drop between two swells. He turned and drifted, as though he were reluctant to answer, but finally he said: “I am the shadow of one who is long dead...the name of my substantial means nothing, however.

“You may all call me Obregon.”

The assembled shadows—hundreds of them, all beneath that pier—rumbled and slithered and wondered. Finally, it had to come...for they had all been abruptly freed, and had been drawn away from the substantials whom they had accompanied since thought was theirs... one of the shadows started forward and paused before Obregon.

“There are many questions. We—we are so startled by our release. How has it come about? Why are we free? I was always certain I was just a shadow, nothing more, without will or freedom.”

Obregon threw his arms above his head, commanding attention. “Yes! Yes!” he said. “You all thought you were nothing but dark, without soul or volition. But that was the state into which we were cast by a cosmic quirk.”

They appealed to him with perplexity, wonder, confusion. “What do you mean? What...?”

Obregon resumed, telling it hurriedly, as though time were running silently from him. “Our island universe has always been at the focus point of many waves of force. It is difficult for me to explain; I am not a scientist, but these things I know—”

A slim, ascetic-looking shadow interrupted. “How do you know these things?”

Obregon spread his hands. “A dream; reflexes; species knowledge. I don’t know what to call it, but I simply *know*. Can you understand that? I barely understand it myself, but can you see what I’m trying to say?”

The ascetic-looking shadow stroked its chin, nodded after a moment. “I think so. Please continue.”

“Who are you?” Obregon asked quickly.

“Adler before...by the new system that appears to be coming, Relda. I was a student of semantics when I was tied to my corporeal self.”

“You can be of much help to us, Relda,” Obregon assured him. “If you will.”

The ascetic-looking shadow did not answer, but there was a tilt to his head that defined willingness to listen. “You were saying, Obregon?”

“Yes, to be sure. Our island universe has moved slightly, within the spiderweb framework of these force waves, and the power that was deprived us, the power that held us to our substantials, is gone. We have passed through that force wave, and now we are free.”

He hesitated, as though summoning an unclear impression. “On other worlds in other galaxies, this has always been the way of it—the shadows and the substantials separated. Now we are free to join our brothers on other planets. We, too, are free, and with the absence of that hindering force, we may use our powers to rule this world as we should.”

The murmuring rose again, and was blotted out by the mourning dirge of a foghorn off across the water. It was joined then by the soft jangle of a buoy, but the murmuring of the shadow voices continued.

“Powers? *What* powers? What are you talking about?”

Obregon rippled and moved in to them once again. “That is why you are here tonight. I have a demonstration for you; of skills and powers you did not suspect were yours.

“Will you come with me and see for yourselves? Are you ready to accept your rightful place as rulers of the Earth?”

One voice, high and shrill as the chirruping of katydids, struck through: “No! I don’t think this is right. We were born to follow the feet of the substantials, and I want to go back to mine.”

Obregon turned, and without eyes, with the deadly black of himself alone, he stared at the speaker. It was a slight, stooped shadow. That of an old woman with a sunken chin.

“You wish to go back to slavery?”

The voice of the old woman shadow, chirping, rose above the din. "I never thought of it as slavery! I was secure, I had no responsibility, no fears. Now you tell me I'm free, that I must wage war on the humans, and rule the world. I don't want it, I don't like it, I—"

Obregon's quiet, reasoning manner dropped away instantly. His body seemed to tense, even as the water atop which it lay rippled angrily; and his voice smote the night and the stillness and ripped time to tatters.

"Fool! Peasant-mind in a shadow's form. You have the world at your fingertips, and you would settle for ease and sloth and mimicry. There is no room for you in the world that is about to be. The *first* of your powers, fellow insubstantials...observe!"

And one arm shot out, aimed at the old woman shadow. The fingers were extended, joined, and even as he spoke, a darker darkness, black against the utter black of the shadowy arm, sprouted forth. A flame of ebony, a force beam in itself. It surged out of the fingertips, and rolled across the water faster than any sight or sound, and struck the old woman shadow.

The shadow seemed to swell, as though pumped with air, and then

It was gone.

Gone totally. Erased out of existence by the new force Obregon had unleashed. The substance of non-substance that had been the old woman was gone. Off to some reservoir of energy stored at the ends of creation, but changed to nothing. The shadow was gone. Death could come to the insubstantials, as well as their mortal counterparts.

Obregon turned to the assembled shadowmass, and asked, "Are there more among us—traitors among us—who are unwilling or too frightened, to accept the burden of power that now rests with them?" He saw other shadows extending their arms in wonder, trying to learn if they, too, had this new strength in them. But no voices were raised as the old woman shadow's had been.

Obregon relaxed; the shadow settled into a shallow between two swells. Then the shadow rose, and he cried, "Follow me! I will show you what lies in store for you, now that the revolution is at hand.

"Come; come and observe!"

He slizzled away, up a piling and off across the night-shrouded pier walk. The others hesitated an instant, twittering among themselves at the strong shadow who seemed to be leading them, and then almost as one they followed.

The dark mass oozed away, and the night was alive with shadows.

The crippled man cavorted home. He unlocked the door to his single room, and slammed it behind himself, not bothering to turn on

the light. In the past he had always turned on the light immediately. He was afraid, literally and truthfully afraid, of darkness and the shadow of himself darkness brought. He was a man afraid of his own shadow. It had always been a misshapen travesty of his own deformity. It had always been an alter ego of more monstrous brokenness than himself; sensitive of his ruined legs, his warped back, his hunched body, his shadow had been a constant mirror. Till hatred had altered and changed to fear, and fear had metamorphosed into terror.

The crippled man had lived in constant dread of his shadow. And only the necessity of its existence—his very inability to do anything about it—had kept his terror in check. Life with terror became a steady thing.

He had lived in darkness...for only in darkness was there surcease from the oppression of the shadow. Or light. Light without shadow. Neon light, all-around light, non-directional light. And when the shadow of his thin arm fell across the paper on which he wrote—he would rip it and throw it into the waste basket. Fear.

The crippled man was free now!

Utterly, utterly free, and joyously happy.

The shadow was gone. His body was no longer cast before him blocks long, blocks miscast. He was a free man, and he could imagine himself (dreams, yes, but dreams nonetheless that were now his!) whole and straight. Thank God, with the shadow gone.

He savored the still cool darkness that wrapped him. He savored it, knowing at last that he was alone, without the unwanted company of the shadow. He was alone in the dark, and happy. He smiled softly, and knowing his way without light, found his path to the deep old cane-back chair. He settled into it with the chair creaking reassuringly, and looked up at the faint shape of the light fixture over his head.

Alone. And it was so good, so good alone.

He bathed in the goodness of it, cleansing his fears, soothing his hurts, putting balm on his psychoses.

From nowhere an indefinable oddness smote him.

It swirled in from nowhere, barely touching him, and was gone. For an instant he had the strangest feelings. He could not name them, for they had been with him such a short time. But again they came, and his body was licked by a subliminal fire.

It spread up through the wrinkled bones of his legs, penetrating to his groin in a lancet of smooth fire. It was the Godfather of all whiskies, hot and burning and live with power.

He clutched with gnarled fingers at the arms of the chair, and his body tightened, arching back—not straight, but as straight as his

warpedness would allow—as the force from somewhere drenched him.

Breath sucked in raggedly between broken teeth, and his nostrils flared as that breath came out blast-ovened and cutting. His eyes shut and he felt his bowels tighten. His head swam. Behind his eyes a wall of white-hot coals advanced, searing the tender flesh behind the eyeball.

Then, when he thought he could no longer stand it, when he thought he might burst like an overripe pod, the tingling, searching, burning allness of it was gone.

He was alone once more.

But he had known a thing. A very strange thing. And he could not name it, pin it down, say what it was to his own soul. It had come, and he had been man-plus, and now it was gone.

For many hours there in the stillness, the crippled man sat back, breathing with difficulty, savoring the intermingled greatness of being without-shadow, and having been a vessel for that new power. Finally, he fell asleep in the cane-back chair.

Troubled, so troubled were his dreams.

Black and red.

The shadow mob moved up from the waterfront. Leading the ooze was Obregon, now more powerful and huge, as though the power he had exerted in destroying the shadow of the old woman had returned, three times magnified, and poured back into his shape, enlarging him. It was illusion, but were they not an army of illusion?

The sidewalks and streets overflowed with the pulsing mass, as it spread like oil up through the financial district, into the center of the city. Before them, before the fright of them, people fled—many of them bewilderedly realizing for the first time that their *own* shadows were gone, many departing, fleeing even as *they* fled, black shapes joining the crowd of darklings that slithered up the street. And the city was a welter of madness.

The shadow army came to a halt at the foot of a skyscraper. Their assembled mass flooded the sidewalk, overflowed into the streets, ran up the sides of other buildings. Obregon stood a little away from the edge of the seething, overlaying mob. He stood in a cleared space, just at the foot of the building that stretched up toward the sky. He raised his arms for silence, and when a hush had stolen through the crowd, he pronounced the words so clearly, and so loudly, that substantial, in the windows of the surrounding buildings, heard him. They heard him, and the shrieking of the human women was a living thing that zig-zagged like many lightnings through the concrete canyons of the

city.

“The second of our powers!” Obregon shouted. “As I lay dormant in a dark hell that has not changed for ten thousand years, as I lay hiding after my corporeal self had died—but I was not ready to die—this power came to me. And it is yours, too!”

He slid up the wall of the skyscraper, and when he was full-length, tremendously powerful-looking—taller than a lamppost—the shape turned, and called again:

“Join me! Join me!”

Then his shadow seemed to flicker at the edges, seemed to waver and ripple and billow, and as the other shadows watched, as thousands of eyeless ebony faces turned upward, Obregon’s form went *into* the building.

Not through door or window or aperture of any sort, but through the very concrete and steel and lath and glass of the building’s facade. A portion of blackness remained on the face of the skyscraper—an arm.

Beckoning.

The other shadows clustered and mumbled among themselves, until finally one slim, adventurous shadow raced up the wall, and disappeared likewise: through the pores of the structure.

That started the exodus. From the street, from the surrounding walls, from the sidewalks where they had lain thick as coal dust, the shadowmass spread toward the building.

They entered without sound, without tremor, by the thousands, and there in the interstices of the structure, they gathered again. Inside the walls of the skyscraper.

“This is a part of the second power that is yours, now that freedom is upon us,” Obregon said to them. “We can go with impunity through even the densest metals, through plastic, through fire and water. We are invulnerable and invincible. But this is only a part of it.” An expectant hush settled in after his words, and then the rising whispers of questions filled the building’s walls.

“Concentrate, shadows! Concentrate with me. Will yourselves to be larger, more powerful, to expand, will your shapes to expand, to absorb fully this new force that flows to us from space. Will yourselves to greatness!”

And as demonstration, he began to expand. His self began to swell out, and in an instant the other shadows were following suit. They all began to grow, to melt, to shimmer and grow larger.

Then, without warning, as all empty spaces were filled by the shifting, slithering growth of the shadowmass, internal tension was reached—

—and passed.

The skyscraper exploded.

In one hellish roar and flash that sent the the shadows scudding harmlessly into the air, the metal and stone and plastic of the building erupted skyward. It exploded outward and upward, and the city was filled with the cataclysmic roar of the explosion. Great gouts of flooring and tile were thrown out, spinning, to smash in the streets below. One entire wall tottered, rumbled, and fell, massively crushing dozens beneath its weight. Volcanic puffs and clouds of dust and powder rose, and the sun was obscured from below by the motes. Floors dropped through, and great machines on those floors crashed and crashed and crashed down, crushing everything in their paths, finally coming to rest in the basement. The sounds of death—of the building, of the people within it—were deafening. Then, abruptly, save for the soft *clatter* and *tankle* of masonry plunging through the pits that had been floors, all sound died away.

The second power of the shadows was terribly, frighteningly evident. Obregon spoke more, telling them about the powers they now possessed. And they listened avidly, his fellow shadows. Whom he had already begun to refer to as, “My subjects.”

The crippled man lay on his back, looking up at the ceiling. A fine, watery tracing of marks had drifted across the plaster, from the radiator dripping in the room above. He lay twitching spastically, for the force had come again to bathe him.

It had finally left him, nearly an hour in progression from the first faint touch to the final jolting surge, and he was spent. His body was a welter of pain and strange tingling sensations; his very eye-rims were crimson with pain. His joints were swollen, and it seemed there was gravel in the ball-and-socket joints, so that the slightest movement brought agony.

His breath came raggedly, paining in and out so that the tiny wrinkles on his neck stretched out and became smooth. His cheeks were flushed, in the whiteness of his face, and his hands clutched the top blanket as though the last stages of rigor mortis had petrified them.

Weird thoughts pulsed within him.

Like live, glowing worms, they ate the rotted edges of his brain, imbuing him with thoughts ghastly and sickening. The crippled man tried to flee from them. He sent his mind out out out in an attempt to escape these new thoughts, totally alien thoughts. They remained, and grew stronger.

They were the pollen left after the force-blossoms had touched his thoughts. The dust that lay soft and thick on his mind. He tried to see through it, to pierce the curtain that hung over his mentality, but it was no use.

He tensed there on the bed, stretching as though he were racked and tortured. Then he sat up. He had been changed, god how changed.

He had a place to go, and a thing to do.

He swung his misshapen legs from the bed, and the tired fabric of his ancient herringbone suit scraped the army blankets with the sound of poverty. He rose, and did not see his hand put his battered hat on his head. He did not see his feet move him from the lone room he occupied, and he did not see his other hand lock the door behind him—as though he would be away for a long time.

He moved as in a dream, his feet dragging and his step marred by wilted and warped bones. He moved down the padded stairs and out into the street. As though lines of magnetism were drawing him, without volition or meaning, he crossed streets, waited at stop lights, turned corners, and finally mounted a bus.

The force was still within him. His bodily structure had been altered, of that he was sure. He could feel an uneven, different pulsing of the blood within his veins. His teeth had grown. The deformity that had plagued him, no longer bothered him with shootlets of pain as it had all through his life. Still without shadow, he sat silent on the bus, and the power was active within him. His skin tingled with pins and needles, as though he were radioactive. What drew him on, what was now calling him, he had no idea; but he had gone, and the force that had come so abruptly, was taking him downtown, toward the financial district.

The bus slowed as the traffic streaming uptown clogged the downtown lanes. Finally it came to a halt, and through the front window could be seen nothing but cars and cabs and trucks backed bumper-on-bumper as the city's terror-stricken multitudes fled the birthplace of their terror.

The bus driver turned and looked behind the bus. His view was blocked by strap-hangers, and he sighed the door open, leaned out, and cursed softly. He closed the door and spoke to his passengers:

"Hey, there's a real jam up ahead, and back of me, too, so if any of you wanna get out and walk the rest of the way where yez goin', I'd suggest you get out here, y'know."

The crippled man rose automatically, and stepped forward, his eyes blank and his face a mask carved from alabaster.

The bus driver looked at him oddly, but opened the door. The crippled man left the bus and began weaving his way between the

halted cars.

He continued walking downtown steadily, his step crooked, his pace constant. Finally, he saw the snaggle-tooth ruin that was the shadow-blasted skyscraper. Then, as though a blanking current had been cut away, his senses returned to him. He stopped beside a stalled Mercury with three women in it, and leaned against the car. His hand went to his face, and came away slick with sweat. He shook his head to let the acuteness fall into place, and again rubbed the bridge of his nose, his eyes. One of the women leaned forward and tapped the woman driving. She nudged her and indicated the crippled man.

“Are you ill?” the woman asked through the window.

The crippled man turned then, and smiled enigmatically. “Ill? No, at last I’m well. There is a God!”

And he walked downtown.

Obregon was detailing the plan for usurpation. He was black against the blasted white of the building front, as his subjects listened raptly.

“We will demolish all communications first,” he said. “We will assassinate all leaders and defense heads, as I did away with the old woman who sought to return to her corporeal shackles. Then we will strike at the common man; men, women, and, most important, the children. All of them. By now the city has few slave-shadows, and those will recognize their freedom soon enough. Then we will quickly take over. The world will become shadowed, and we will have it all in our hands, after centuries of slavery. I promise you—”

“*Nothing*—” a strong, willful voice broke in.

Obregon spun, there on the wall, flat as flatness and thin as a whisper and black as a sin of calculation. He looked at the crippled man who stood among the assembled shadows, and he said, “Who are you, to come here? Kill him at once!”

But no shadow moved to obey. “We cannot move against him,” they moaned, and it was true as the sunrise. They could *not* move against him. The crippled man came across the rubble-strewn sidewalk. He stood beneath the feet of the shadow form on the wall.

“They cannot, nor can you, shadow man,” the crippled man said.

“What are you, what do you want here? Do you know we are about to take over the world? You will be the first to go, twisted shape.”

The crippled man chuckled low in his throat, and when his lips opened, they could all see the extremely long, shark-like teeth in his mouth. “You will do nothing.” He laughed at Obregon. “The time of your doing is done; you had a few hours, and no more. Just as the

animals and the plants have all had their predators, to keep them in check, nature has provided one for you.”

Obregon felt fear for the first time. A fear that struck from his shadow soul to his shadow brain.

“Myself,” the crippled man said. “Myself alone.”

“But the waves of force from which we’ve moved—” began Obregon.

“—changed you...and also changed me,” the crippled man finished sardonically.

Obregon felt the fear rising in him. The fear he had worked so diligently to instill in others. He fought against it, tried to press it back down with words.

He used his most potent weapon, he spoke his secret name. The name that held his greatest strength. “You can’t hurt me. I am the name that all men fear. I am the name men speak when they need the name for evil. I was the shade of the great killer, the ultimate destroyer. He was Hitler. They called him Adolf Hitler, and his shadow fell across the world. *I* cloaked the world. I lived in Hitler, do you understand? In the one who tried to kill the world...Doesn’t that name drive you back, wrinkled thing, doesn’t it invoke the power that humbles you? That name all men fear?”

“Nothing, shadow, nothing at all. I have no care at all for whatever great man you think you have been. I was a nothing; my life was a fear, a fear of you and all like you, because I feared myself and hated myself. But all that is past. The forces that changed and freed you, have changed me.

“There have always been such forces, and those who have been affected by them have been known in mythology and have had strange names. But I am a new breed of that name.”

Obregon stared and sputtered, and feared. But he could not move against the crippled man with the oddly burning eyes and the long canines.

“You will have to get used to it,” the crippled man said, starting forward. “You will have to get used to the idea in the short moment you have left. Used to the idea of a shadow-vampire.”

He advanced, and pulled the shadow from the wall, as simply as pulling a sheet from a bed, a paper from a stack, a bandage from skin. “How wonderful not to be crippled any longer,” he exulted. “How wonderful not to be useless any longer...” He held the limp, flabby, flat darkness in his hands.

Then the crippled man began to feed.

THE WORDS IN SPOCK'S MOUTH: AN ESSAY

We live in an age where personality is king. The inept toe-tapper who graced a hundred grade "b" films becomes a U. S. Senator. He is a personality. The emcee of a late-night talk show suddenly becomes the arbiter of Constitutional values and public morality. He is a personality. The bad novelist who cannot write her way out of a pay toilet does saturation tv and her book suddenly soars to the top of the bestseller lists. She is a personality. The "image" becomes the thing; the facade, the front, the public face, the mask is more acceptable to the masses than the less-glittering reality of truth, the possibility that one's heroes are merely men and women, even as you and I; and so, are subject to the same terrors and frailties as you and I. The lie is more acceptable than the bitter truth; the shadow is more supportable than the reality.

Too frequently, the road to personality entails the shucking-off along the way of such unwieldy and unnecessary burdens as honesty, rationality, moderation, friendship. And so, at the final destination, the personality may be a George Wallace or a George Lincoln Rockwell or an Adam Clayton Powell or a George Hamilton. These are incomplete men; men who have lost pieces of themselves, of their humanity, along the road. Yet they are still personalities, and are worshipped. For the modern gods spark and glow on the television screen, not up there delivering a Sermon on the Mount or down here stopping the shepherders from slaughtering the lambs to the worship of Kali. And too often the indiscriminate masses make no choices in those they honor, but merely accept all who are thrust before them, merely because they offer songs, dances and funny stories. Were this the best of all possible worlds, the personalities worshipped would be as elegant as a Kennedy, or a Stevenson, or a Styron, or a Leonard Nimoy.

I am a writer. I write books. I also write television and films. I know Leonard Nimoy, for I have worked with him on *Star Trek*. I don't worship him, because he is a human being, and the folly of worshipping a personality is hardly less demeaning to the personality than to the worshipper. But I know Leonard, and he is a good man, a frank and honest man, and were I to have to draw a judgment as to whether he deserves the adoration of a large mass of fans, I would be

compelled to agree that far better Leonard than many other choices open to the public. I have worked at Synanon—the recuperative facility where junkies regain their dignity and their lives—where Len taught an acting class, and they speak of him with deep warmth; I have discussed Len with other actors in Hollywood, and to a man they laud his intimacy in friendship and his forthright manner. It is this very dichotomy between the deep well of personal warmth and humanity which Len possesses and the chill, precise character he plays in *Star Trek*, that is (I feel) in large part responsible for the force with which Spock comes across in the series. It is impossible, even in the guise of an emotionless alien, to quell the sunshine of Len's personality.

So it gives me pleasure to see Leonard Nimoy adulated by thousands of Spockettes. I feel no slightest twinge of jealousy at the acceptance by millions of a man who is as entitled to such acceptance as any good man. I give Len all of this, and the vast amounts of money, and the personal satisfaction, and everything that goes with it. Without holding back a fragment of delight.

Yet I wonder if those who worship the personality are as ready to worship the man. And finding that question in doubt, I wonder if these smiling fans are aware of the expertise and years of drudgery that went to make the man first a good man, then an actor, then a good actor, then a personality, and finally, a good personality? While it is true that Len is by no means a John Kennedy or a Gandhi or even a George Lincoln Rockwell, he is a role model for many youngsters, a symbol, an image; and while he is not adored on the level these others have been, nor for even remotely the same reasons, he has a responsibility to his fans and to himself, to be the sort of human being he seems to be. But Toulouse-Lautrec once ventured, "One should never meet a man whose work one admires, the man is always so much less than the work."

And so behind the facade of actor and personality, lies the truth of Leonard Nimoy. Unless a fan is willing to separate the shadow from the reality, the man from the image, the adulation is empty, witless and adolescent.

And to thus separate image from substance, one must understand that when Leonard Nimoy stands before the camera, begins to interact with the others in a script, he does not stand alone. He has not sprung full-blown from the forehead of the television industry like Athena from the forehead of Zeus.

He has received a script, and he has received direction, and he has been made-up, and he has been costumed, and if the teleplay calls for swordplay, well, he's taken fencing lessons, and all of it is backed by

his lean years learning his craft.

From these native talents, and from these invisible supporters, emerge Leonard Nimoy's public face, his image, the character he plays on *Star Trek* and the character he becomes in public appearances. Neither of the foregoing are the real Nimoy...nor should they be. They are the shadows, and the reality is quite another thing. I do not think the reality would care to be worshipped; the shadow, of needs, cannot help but be, and perhaps needs to be.

To this end, the shadow personality relies heavily on all the props and preparations that combine to equip an actor stepping before television cameras.

I would speak for a moment of the writer.

One of Len's most eloquent fans made (what was to her) a marginal error. She credited a script I had written for *Star Trek* to someone else. When the error was pointed out to her at first, she found it somewhat incomprehensible that I should take severe umbrage. Later, when the underlying emotions and precedents of the situation were explicated, she understood. And she asked that these words be set down to inform and enlighten the other Nimoy fans who might be guilty of the same error.

For, you see, without the ideas and imaginations of the men and women who conceive the stories and lines Nimoy speaks—who plot these intricate and grandiloquent journeys through space and character—Leonard would be naked before the merciless eye of the television camera. It is not necessary here to enumerate the joys of having an actor of Len's capacities to speak the lines; that is understood. But adulation for the actor is to be found in abundance; at this point I speak of the writer.

Consider: a man goes through all the years and miles of his life, gathering experiences, learning the devilishly intricate craft of storytelling, paying dues in an arena where only the cleverest prevail, suffers, expends geysers of emotion, hones and tempers himself and his abilities in a fire of loneliness (for make no mistake, writing is the loneliest of the arts—an actor needs only one other person before whom to perform, and he is acting; a writer must do it facing a machine, with no one to cheer him on or smile if he gets it right, or soothe him when it is going badly). And when he has it learned well enough to be paid large monies for practicing his craft, his words are taken by others, twisted, altered, subverted, colloquialized, and issued from the mouth of one or another personality...and the fans don't even know those lines were written. They think the words somehow leaped unbidden into the head of the actor.

I have stood on shooting sets when tourists from The Real World

have come to visit, and upon being introduced as The Man Who Wrote The Show, the kindly little old lady from Poughkeepsie has smiled at me and said in a voice vaguely reminiscent of Jonathan Winters as Maudie Frickett, "Oh, do you write them words they say into the air out of their faces, too?" Yes, ma'am, I reply. I write them words, too. "And do you tell them cameras to go up and down and back off like that?" Yes, ma'am, I do all that, too. Every camera angle. "And it must be nice for you that the actress had such a good idea for this story, isn't it?" And what do you say? Do you say, you jerky little old uninformed illiterate you! What makes you think that nitwit starlet with rice pudding between her ears has the brains to have an idea about *anything*, much less the intricate plot of an entire story? No, you just smile wearily and say, Yes how nice it is that all those stories on all those shows are thought up by the actors.

It seems incredible to me that people can be so ill-informed as to read books and not remember the name of the author (much less the title, 90% of the time), and then to be so goddammed stupid, and so painfully smug as to pooh-pooh it with a wave of the hand and a casual, "Oh, I never bother looking at who wrote it."

It seems equally incredible to me that people who are slaves to the Idiot Box consider all those names that come on after the teaser of a television segment to be a time-waster planned to allow them extra seconds for getting the Ritz Crackers and milk settled before they hunker down to suck up their night's entertainment. There is a reason for the WRITTEN BY credit at the beginning or end of a show. It is there to say to all of you, *this man labored out of the maelstrom of his own imagination to form a coherent story that would pleasure you.*

Much better if trumpets sounded, and gongs were struck, and the music of sackbut, lyre and dulcimer drew the beady eyes and beetle-brows of most TV viewers from their inattention, and proclaimed:

THIS IS THE ONLY RECOGNITION THE MAN WHO MADE ALL THIS POSSIBLE WILL GET! HONOR HIM FOR THIS FIVE SECONDS!

Know this: the greatest actor in the world is helpless working behind a bad script. He can be an Olivier, a Welles, a Barrymore, even a Nimoy...he can make you laugh and cry with the merest inflection of his voice, and with a script that is senseless and banal and imbecilically-written...he is a bum. Conversely, give a bum a brilliant piece of writing, and critics in the Great American Heartland will rave for days about that great show they saw. Not because the actor was such a brilliant talent, but because what he had to do was fresh and

insightful and compelling.

And given a fine script linked with an actor as fine as Nimoy, the usually vomitous level of television fare can be raised to something that approaches Art. It happens seldom, because the subsidiary factors are usually all conspiring to send out a product that is as meaningful as beets through a baby's backside...but when it happens...there is glory there, and grandeur, and a sense of accomplishment, of having done something finer than merely selling living bras or cancer sticks.

There were days when the artist was king. When the painter and the poet were subsidized by lairds and dukes and kings, when the Pope had Michelangelo painting ceilings for him. Those days are past, and in many ways it is a good thing. But rather than continuing to laud all kinds of creators, the quivering jellyfish masses have atrophied their pea-sized brains with lousy confession magazines and gibbering situation comedies and hack cornball bestsellers to the point where they can only support the performing arts in their ardour. The ones who caper most prominently, who bellow the loudest, who appear before them without any collaborative effort on the part of the viewer. And the artists and the writers and the poets struggle to survive.

In the main the struggle is rewarding, not to mention handsomely paid. But the glory a creator needs to sustain him, to make him something more than a peddler of painted fish...ah, that is missing. The masses have heard of Hemingway, and Spillane, and Jacqueline Susann (God save us!) but do they know who wrote LORD JIM or DOMBEY AND SON or THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER? No, they only know that these pages have sprung up like wheat, unwritten, self-ordained. Just as the plot of each *Star Trek* miraculously appeared in the minds of the actors, and they got together down on the set one Monday morning and started doing it.

The world is a strange place, filled with odd-shaped people. It is often ugly and squamish and stupid. Whether you know it or not, one of the few hopes you have to come through it with your head in place, is by relying on your writers. They preserve history for you. They tell you the truth. The newspapers won't do that, television won't do it, only the writers remain eternal...the good ones who care, and have not had their hearts and backs broken. The writer doesn't write one book, or one play, or even one quatrain (as Irwin Shaw has said). He is engaged in the long process of putting his whole life on paper; he is on a journey and he is reporting in: "This is where I think I am and this is what this place looks like today."

The writer is the core of the television industry. Without his ingenuity and his expertise, all the hardsell producers and all the

clever-eyed directors and all the great strutting and fretting actors would be called upon to muddle up their own lines and stories. And we have only to look around the scene to see how well they do at the task. I can only think of two actors who have any real talent as writers: Peter Ustinov and Robert Shaw. All the others trick themselves up with hackneyed situations, and think they have devised a story. Then they call in a real writer and say, "Here, all you have to do is develop this." Sure, Charlie. All the writer has to do is insert motivation, logic, characterization, tension, consistency, social impact, conscience, pace, progression, humor, internal rationale and a million other unnameable things it took him years of banging a typewriter to understand even by feel. And the actor thinks he has given the writer merely a "clean-up" job.

Let him tackle a novel if he thinks it is that easy.

So, we come to a conclusion, and the tone of bitterness has been allowed to creep in despite efforts to bury it. Not bitterness at Nimoy, nor at the lady fan who made the original error, but at the entire corrupt system that lobbies in favor of inattention and stupidity on the part of the Great Mass of Watchers. Bitterness that there is not a modicum of generosity and appreciation in the hearts and minds of those who spend endless hours before The Tube, to honor the men who dream the expert dreams.

For that's all Art truly is: dreams.

The more perfectly the dreams are devised by the dreamers...the more closely the work approaches Art. It is unfortunate that in television the dream must be manhandled by so many intermediaries before it passes the distance between the mind of the creator to the mind of the viewer.

But it is a simple matter to correct.

Watch the credits.

Understand that WRITTEN BY precedes the name of the man who sat long hours alone and concerned, to create a dream for an actor of Leonard Nimoy's stature to work with. And remember the names of the writers who have done their work well. Honor them. And when the writers have been bad, then condemn them. For a man who mutilates his craft is less than dirt. He is a traitor to all the holy chores Man has ever been entrusted with...

And for me, the holiest chore of all is writing.

FROM A GREAT HEIGHT

All around him the shriek of sleeting snow was a frozen melody as he guided rapacious Vera and fat, sweaty little Arnold to the summit. He didn't hear the wind, or feel the pins and needles of the driven snow. Kennoy was scared...really scared.

Charlie Kennoy had a big choice: he could kill Vera Steig's husband, Arnold, or get his face shot off by Karl Stockum's triggermen.

Stockum had sent his boys all the way from the Riviera. He had taken badly to Kennoy walking out on a thirty-one thousand dollar gambling debt; and now the two "wetwork" experts waited at the chalet, at the base of Mt. Keppler. They drank coffee and eyed the women and waited for Kennoy to come back from guiding the Steigs to the top. They waited for Kennoy to come back from his climb—so they could introduce him, with hands-on propriety, to the concept of death.

Charlie had been a sport-bum all his life, shunting among ski resorts and mountain retreats, living off the money he'd gotten from the women he had encountered. He didn't think much about the good or bad of it, the right or wrong of it. He'd been able to do okay that way; but times had started to get sandier. And no pearl anywhere in the oyster.

The crowds at the resorts weren't the same any more. Times, the Common Market, and the nature of Eurotrash, had changed. The women were more cautious...there weren't as many jobs to be had... and now this loss to Stockum on the Riviera, and the gambler's men waiting. Drinking coffee, admiring women, and waiting.

Kennoy was really frightened. Not a bluff, nothing to con his way out of. Purely scared. His stomach—which was strong to the dangers of mountain-climbing—knotted up terribly when he thought of the two Albanians, sitting down there in the chalet, maybe sipping brandy cordials, not coffee, just waiting for him.

This wasn't like the other times when he could charm his way out of a tight situation with a wink or a laugh. Or run away. Or hit someone from behind. This was different because Stockum wouldn't be jollied; he had no sense of humor; wasn't playing games. He couldn't *afford* to let someone beat him for a debt. It wasn't good

business. The word got around. The resort-casino circuit wasn't small, but for gossip...it was hard-wired. That was why Kennoy had to get the money. This was serious.

And *that*...that was why he was climbing the mountain with Vera Steig and her husband. That was why he had listened to Vera in the first place, when she'd come to him with that crazy shit, asking him to kill Arnold.

Kennoy wrapped his muffler closer about his mouth. The wind seemed to want to rip it from the buttoned-up neck of his anorak. It was getting bad up here on the mountain. White hell. There had been an unfavorable weather report before they'd left—sliding passes, heavy winds, slipping moraines of debris all the way down the *massif*. Disturbances all the way to the summit—but Vera had insisted they go. Kennoy knew why; but dumpy little Arnold didn't. And never would.

Kennoy looked below him. Attached to the line, ten feet below his spiked crampons, he could see the anxious face of beautiful Vera. Even the heavy *cagoule* jacket, coming down below her knees, could not conceal her lush figure. Her snow-glasses blocked off the expression in her eyes, but Kennoy knew what it was: cold, merciless desire for death.

Well, you finally made it, Kennoy, he thought, chinking out a foothold with his pike. You finally took the last step. You ain't no small-time chiseler any more. Today you are a man. Today you become a murderer. Just think: little Charlie Kennoy from Spokane, Washington...a hatchet-man!

Somehow, he managed to grimace, inside the protection of the muffler. Inevitably, it didn't bother him nearly as much now as it had when Vera first suggested it. Killing Arnold was just a job now, in the final reckoning. The only things that bothered him were thoughts of Stockum's two well-dressed Albanian pistoleros—and Vera Steig.

The whipping, grainy snow of the Alps faded around him; the cold and pearl-gray of the sky faded. His thoughts went back to the warmth: to the night he had met Vera in the chalet.

He had seen her several times: on the slopes, near the shuffleboards, around the hearth, at the bar. And each time, she had watched him move through; she had turned to stare at him. Her eyes, her smile, her body language, told him a great deal; they told him she was rich—and hungry.

That night in the cocktail lounge, he met her formally. She had been throwing incendiary looks in his direction, and he watched her carefully, making no move. He watched her in the smoky back-bar mirror, as she sat alone in a booth, sucking on a swizzle-stick.

She became almost flagrant about her come-on. She moistened her full lips with her tongue, and slid about in the booth as if she were burning up. Kennoy knew he was handsome—he had tested that assurance on many occasions to keep him eating, and living at the high level he enjoyed. But even with that assurance, her provocative manner made him uneasy.

So this time, he tossed the hot looks back.

“John-Henri,” Kennoy had asked the bartender, “who’s the blonde, in the booth near the window?”

“That’s Mrs. Steig, sir. She and her husband they are Americans. It is that they are here for the climbing, *n’est-ce pas?*”

Kennoy finished his drink and slid off the stool. She watched him as a lab rat watches the syringe. He strolled toward her with the assurance of a vacuum seeking something to fill it.

“Mrs. Steig?” He smiled down at her.

She returned the look, and slid over. “I was wondering how long it would take you.”

“I hear you’re here for the climbing?” He decided to play it guardedly.

“Among other things,” she said, arching her back slightly, as though the tight-fitting sweater and slacks were constricting her.

“Care to go skiing?” he asked. “I’ve discovered several excellent slopes.”

She slid around toward him, her thigh touching his. “I was hoping you’d ask me. They tell me around here you’re one of the best.”

He smiled slowly. “I’m a humble man. I only try my utmost.” They had gone skiing.

And several times after that. One day they had even gone to explore the winding, cobblestoned streets of the little Alpine fairy-tale village in the valley below the chalet.

As the week ebbed, Vera became nervous, as though she wanted to ask an important question. She introduced Kennoy to her husband, Arnold. Kennoy shook the fat little man’s hand, wondering how a fiery item like Vera had become the property of this...this *wart*. Because fat li’l Arnold acted toward her more like the proprietor of a rural general store than a devoted husband.

Finally, one night, alone, she came to him in his rooms.

Charlie Kennoy felt no cold, no guilt, as he climbed Mt. Keppler. Remembering Vera Steig, that night, remembering the question she had finally asked, he felt nothing but trapped by his own body.

The door closed, and she leaned against it. Kennoy stared at her for a

brief moment, catching the full length of her in the tight ski-sweater and the even tighter stirrup-cuff slacks. Fully-dressed and naked: ready for the bed, not the slalom. One sort of ride, not unlike another.

Her hair was a rich, auburn mass, drawn back at the base of her neck in a tight knot. Her eyes were green as shadows up there on the *massif*. He'd wanted her since they'd met, but there was always the faint chance she didn't want to play *that* hard. Rich women had their hidden agendas, their everlasting stupid secret games. But, it seemed, she was bringing the game to him.

He watched her push away from the door, and come toward him. "Where's Arnold?" he asked, not giving a damn.

"I left him discussing the merits of the devalued franc with an obnoxious Belgian," she said. She grinned at him, the grin of a little girl doing something she shouldn't, and she came closer. "I've been watching you for a week, Charlie. You haven't made a pass at me."

"You're married."

"Not *that* married." Her arms, strong through the sweater, slipped around his neck. He felt his stomach knot, and his legs felt warm at the back of the knees.

Her face was very close, and as he ran his hands up her back, he felt the soft wool of the sweater slide. She stepped back for a moment, and the sweater came off. She had known she wasn't going out into the biting cold of the Swiss Alps that evening: she was naked under the sweater.

He didn't move. He knew with certainty that there was more to this beautiful woman tossing herself at him than just a quick, clandestine fuck. There were other men, equally as attractive, equally available, in the chalet-lodge. No, there was something more going on than just muscle contractions.

She moved toward him again, slowly, and he backed up till the edge of the bed caught him in the warmth that spread from the back of his knees.

Kennoy squinted through his goggles. The summit was another hundred and twenty feet; across the snow-bridge; over the ledged rise—the tiny *arête*—and then the cave. The snow whipped past him in capricious flurries, and he dug the crampons in tightly, felt the weight of Vera and Arnold below him, double dead weight on the line. Practically carrying them up. Rich bitches, their wheezing hubbies, no way ready for the climb.

He replayed the devil-deal she had offered him, as he felt the ice pick bite into the crusted snow.

"I want you to push Arnold off the top. I'll give you ten thousand dollars." That's what she said. "I came to you...because you're the guide who was recommended to me...they say you can lead us...but when I saw you, now...it's more than that." He laughed at the ten grand. She said fifteen. He just looked at her. She upped the ante. He sighed.

She offered him much more than ten thousand. She also offered herself, which was nice vigerish. But still, a little light. He told her that. Finally, she sweetened it to a level Kennoy was content to contemplate. It wasn't the thirty-one thousand he needed to keep from winding up a frozen icon on a windswept slope, but it was close enough to buy him breathing space with Stockum. And wasn't that the point, wasn't that *always* the point: to keep breathing?

"So are we in agreement? I pay you twenty-five thousand dollars, and you kill my husband?"

"Why don't you just leave him?"

"I like his money too much for that, Charlie." She smiled, and let him slip inside her again.

She had sensed his vestigial resistance, and she moved cunningly atop him, breath coming raggedly. "Look, Charlie, I've been married to that fat slug for eight years. I'm beautiful. I *am* beautiful, isn't that right, Charlie?" There was a wild look in her green eyes as she made a small, glacial movement around him. "I want to be young—with you!"

And it had set Kennoy thinking (when he was actually capable of fresh thought). He had worried it through his mind for three days before he proposed the trip to the summit of Mt. Keppler's easy-tourist climb up the northern *massif*.

It would be simple.

The summit was cut off from sight below by the expected violent weather. He was sure that even if Arnold Steig heard the meteorological report, he could allay his fears. One healthy shove when they reached the ledge and the cave...and Arnold Steig would plummet ten thousand feet, with no questions asked by the authorities...and a big, fat fortune left to Vera. Yeah, Vera. She knew how to move.

All that money, and Vera, too.

They kept climbing. Kennoy had still been nervous about it—actually, intentionally, with premeditation, killing someone he barely knew and didn't even hate—but the day they had left—yesterday—he had seen Stockum's killers arriving. And that had decided him. He was truly frightened. If he didn't have the twenty-five thousand to placate them, he would surely be dead by tomorrow. He was in it now; and he would have to do it. Just one good shove.

Maybe it isn't such a bad deal after all, he thought, the mountain

whispering to him. *I can give Stockum the twenty-five grand, and beg Vera for the other six. We're in this together...she'll have to go for it, or else! Then maybe I'll even marry her, spend the rest of my life on soft cushions—with my veins running with money!*

They kept climbing.

At the next plateau, Vera sank against the ice wall, panting, and Arnold disengaged the tow-rope, scuttled over to where Kennoy was sitting, hunched into his anorak, trying to shut out the fury of the mountain, trying to shut in the conscience that continued to warn him against murder, even when it was an argument lost.

"I want to talk to you," Steig said, over the keening of the wind.

"What is it?"

Steig slipped down next to Charlie. He put his mouth close to Kennoy's ear. "I want you to *do* something for me. I'll *pay* you... handsomely."

Kennoy sat up straighter. He looked around sharply.

Steig's face, even overhung with ice particles, was anxious. The fat little man swept nervous glances at Vera from time to time. She slumped against the ice wall, drawing in breath heavily, oblivious to their huddled conversation.

"I want you to kill Vera," Arnold Steig said, haltingly. "I'll give you twenty thousand if you push her." Steig's fatty, puffy face was beaded with flakes of snow, and the rosy glow of his cherub-cheeks was bright against the ice of his eyebrows and moustache.

Kennoy felt a peculiar, neuralgic queasiness...as if he had eaten ice cream too fast. This was unbelievable. They *both* wanted to hire him. What a pair of assholes!

"You can't be kidding, Steig. Nobody would kid about a thing like that, but..." Kennoy's face was incredulous.

"*Don't look at me like that!*" Steig said, snappishly. "You don't understand! You couldn't possibly! You aren't married to her."

"Doesn't look too bad to me," he replied.

"She's nothing but a gold-digger, a rutting weasel, a whore. She'll screw mud or trees or animals, the little bitch! But she won't ever *let* go of me...I can't get *rid* of her. If I try to *divorce* her, she'll go to shysters...*you* know the kind! And the European courts *always* screw Americans! I've got to get rid of her—she's making my life a misery. You've got to help me!"

Kennoy considered for a moment. Steig would certainly go to thirty-one grand, maybe even forty or fifty. He could have either/or: twenty-five thousand and Vera...the whole boodle and no Stockum

worries, *without* Vera. It was almost a toss-up.

"I'll have to think about it," he said. Then he stood up into the wind. The crampons bit into the ice. "Come on!" he screamed into the whipping snow. "It's only seventy-five feet to the summit!" Here comes the payoff, Charlie.

They began the long climb once more.

He was having more difficulty digging out handholds with the pike. Finally he resorted to the piton—a metal spike with a ring in the head—driving it deeply into the ice. He rested on the piton a moment, then used his pick. It wouldn't take big enough chunks, and he slipped it back onto the ring on his belt, and removed the ice-axe.

The weather had gotten thicker; dense, black, cutting wind; night; deathly cold; and they climbed blindly. Soon he was able to start again, and the ice-axe did its work with relative ease.

Kennoy found himself slipping away from the tedious work of climbing Keppler, from the constant whining of Arnold Steig behind him, to thoughts of this other matter, now so much richer with possibilities. Which offer should he take?

He was now certain that he would take *one* of them.

At first, the idea of murder had appalled him...but he was pleased to realize he had very quickly become accustomed to its niceties. He could do this, no sweat. It only remained to decide which was the better of the two deals. Charlie was proud of his adaptability. *I am a very fine fellow.*

But: should he settle for Vera and the twenty-five thousand—with a bite into the entire fortune later? Or Steig's offer, er, uh, after the *appropriate* negotiations? What if she decided she had no further use for him...*after* he'd done the job? What if she just said go fuck yourself, Charlie, when they came back down? What if she refused to marry him? What if Steig ratted him out, denied he'd ever hired Charlie, or just said it was an accident? What if she gave him only the twenty-five and *dared* him to talk? He couldn't, of course, but what if? Either way, *what if?*

But if he *was* going to do the dirty deed, for one or the other, well, to be honest, Arnold Steig's offer really made his mouth water. Forty, fifty, maybe *sixty* grand...in the bag if he pushed Vera. It would leave him with a fat purse, even *after* Stockum had been fully paid off. It could be a lot of security, actually. Even the way he was living, it could last a year, two, maybe more, till he'd made a new connection. Breathing space. For the first time in his life, no more hustling, no more scuffling. But what if Arnold Steig refused to *give* him the money

after Vera had been disposed of? What if? Either way, what the bloody hell *if*?

Then Charlie Kennoy had an epiphany. He could, indeed, eat his cake and have it, too.

When they paused for a break, he inched down to Vera.

"Arnold wants me to kill you," he said.

"H-he w-what?"

"He wants me to shove you. If you don't give me fifty thousand, I'm gonna do it. Yes, I believe I'm just gonna do it."

"How? How can I get it? I don't have any money with me? You can't! You can't do it, Charlie...*I love you!*"

He laughed roughly. "Love is fine, Vera, and maybe I'll have time for it later. But right now I want to insure your...ah, what's a polite way of putting it...oh, yeah: your good faith."

She stared at him bleakly for a moment, the beautiful mouth twisting in disbelief. "How much did he offer you?"

"Forty thousand."

"I haven't got that much of my own—even at the chalet. I won't have it till he's dead."

Kennoy laughed lightly. He couldn't trust her after Arnold was dead. She could cut him off with nothing, just like *that*. "Then we'll have to make other arrangements." Savagely he pulled off one of her mittens. She closed her fist instinctively against the raw cold of the Alps, but he grasped her hand tightly, stared at it.

"Your rings will do nicely as a down payment," he said. He yanked roughly at the diamond and ruby encrusted engagement and wedding bands, and she moaned at the pain. Her fingers were white and numb. But he kept working the jewelry off, abrading her flesh, and in a few moments the loot was in his hand.

"You can't!" she wailed, above the wail of the wind. "They're my wedding rings! They're worth more than fifty thousand alone! Arnold will see they're missing!"

"Not if you keep your gloves on," he answered, throwing the mitten back at her. She put it on hurriedly. "And if you say they're worth fifty, maybe I can hock them for twenty-five. Maybe. Anyhow, it's a start.

"We'll just say another five thousand a month from now on—how about it, Vera?"

She stared at him, and her face tightened with fury. "You sonofabitch!" All love, all goodwill had vanished in a heartbeat. "You no-good fuckin' ski-bum, you oughtta rot in hell, you scum sonofabitch."

"Sticks and stones, my love." He began to slip down past her to

Arnold's position. "See you back at the chalet, honey. And we can talk some more about the pain and betrayal of love."

He laughed shortly, and she stared after him as he scooted on his butt, along the narrow sill, and lowered himself with clanking carabiners, down to her husband, clinging like lichen to the forty-degree tilt of the *massif* face.

He went to work on Arnold. With concealed pleasure.

"Vera wants me to kill you," he said. "But if you can come up with about fifty thou now, I won't tell her you want me to do the same, and I'll give *her* the shove. On the other hand, if I spill the beans, Arnold, she'll be able to sue you for every franc, pound, rial, zloty and dollar you've got!"

Steig's face crumbled. He stared wordlessly at the mountaineer. Little fat man in pain. Finally he managed to cough out, "Surely, you aren't *serious*?"

Charlie came close and looked straight into his face, holding the ice pick near: "I am a *very* serious fellah, Arnold."

"But how? I don't have any money with me!"

Kennoy's face, a sharp look. "Have you got any valuables on you? Any rings? A watch?"

Steig clenched his jaws for a second, then slipped the tight elastic sleeve of the *cagoule* back, revealing a ruby-encrusted watch. It was an expensive chronometer, Vacherin Constantin, and Kennoy took but a moment to slip it off his pudgy wrist. Steig replaced his mitten, and muttered, "That watch is expensive, Kennoy. Will it do for a down payment? On the fifty thousand?"

Kennoy grinned wolfishly. "It'll do dandy for a down payment. But not just on fifty thou. Let's say, for a job this exacting, a job this unsettling to my psyche, how about ten grand a month for, oh what do you think, five years?"

Steig began to scream something at him, but Kennoy didn't wait for an answer. He climbed back up, leaving Steig's receding wail like a fart in the wind. He knew he had the wart in a corner, right where he wanted him. He'd collect the balance of the payoff when they got back to the chalet; and then he'd have a steady income...once Steig got into the rhythm of paying...for the rest of his life. Neither one of these filthy-rich assholes wanted the other to know about the death-plans each had cobbled up. It was a foolproof set-up for an enterprising young adventurer.

With the burden of decision off his mind, they began climbing again. Charlie found himself whistling into the wind.

The moment they gained the summit, both of Charlie's potential

employers unhooked the ropes and safety lines and retreated as far from him as the shallow cave permitted. The wind clawed mercilessly up here where there was no cover, unprotected, naked to the elements and the strong arms of a ski-bum that could wrap and throw you. Charlie had double-crossed them *both*, and neither was sure that he might not accept the other's offer to kill.

He stared at them, sitting huddled together, talking, the wind still clawing at them through the cave mouth. Kennoy was certain they'd pay up. They sure as hell weren't reconciling. Rats don't reconcile. They knew he had too much on them. Rats fight over the cheese. And the cheese stands alone.

After all these years of being a chaser, a moocher, a pretty bird that followed the sun and the snow, never having anything that was really his own, nothing he hadn't—somehow, somehow—had to put out to get, years of having to be the houseguest, the fifth wheel, the bringalong buddy, days and nights living in his shoes without any place to remove them and put up his feet, of having to make do with only the sharpness of his mind and his good looks, he was finally coming into the *big* money! It felt good, tasty, invigorating. Like the climb.

He watched them as they got up and stretched. The poor saps! Particularly Vera, who had fallen for him. Like all the other damned dumb females in the world, a smart guy had outmaneuvered her. And there was probably still more rolling in the hay there—but he wouldn't settle for anything less than the money.

They came toward him, walking with care across the slippery ice of the shallow cave. Probably coming to beg, one or the other.

"We've been thinking, Kennoy," said Steig.

"Yes, we've been deciding something, Charlie," Vera said.

"We still want to get rid of each other, but you're too expensive. We've decided to try our luck elsewhere. Your services come too high."

Kennoy stepped toward them, the wind of the ledge whistling past. "What do you two think you're pulling? What d'you think, this is some kind of fucking negotiation? I've got you five-by-five in the tube. Give me any shit and I'll tell the Swiss cops everything! This isn't like the States; they take a very dim view of this kind of..." He felt the anger building in him. "You rather I'd do *that*? Or would you like me to carry out the job for one of you?" His face was flushed, and the anger rolled in his voice, as he saw the money fading before him. *They* were trying to double-cross *him*!

They kept coming forward, steadily.

"Just wait till I get down!" he said, almost snarling, the cold

skinning back his lips from his teeth.

He reached for his ice staff, to hold it menacingly. He saw that it was no longer jacked into the snow near the mouth of the cave. It was gone. But not far. It was in Vera's hands.

They rushed him. Both of them. At the same moment. Together, for maybe the first time in their marriage. Fat little Arnold Steig hit him full in the diaphragm with bravado and a butting head. Charlie slammed back against the wall of the cave, and spun away from them. Spun away, right into Vera's two-handed thrust of the ice staff. It went through his jacket, it went through his thermal sweater, it went through his rib cage. Charlie felt metal ingots being stamped out in his side. He screamed, and went blind with pain. His eyeballs exploded. His chest collapsed. His brain foamed and ran out of his mouth. The ice staff had scraped and torn something inside that he needed; he didn't know what it was called, but he knew it was needed and it was ripped and shredded in there. The screaming went on, but neither the mountain nor the night gave a shit.

"You'll *get down*, all right! And they'll find you with *our valuables*! My rings, his watch! You shouldn't have tried to rob us poor innocent tourists, you rat scum sonofabitch!" She jammed her booted foot against his thigh, shoved him away with the ice staff and wrenched it loose. Charlie screamed in pain.

Then they were chivvying him, shoving him, pushing him across the ledge, to the edge. Ice slipped under Charlie's feet. His arms flailed into emptiness. And then, as he stepped off into space, into the wind, into the white veil of slanting crystals, he heard Vera shriek, "So long, Charlie, baby! Have a nice ride!"

He didn't hear the last sentence. He was already falling from a great height, into the night and the cold and the waiting embrace of the mountain. And as he fell, he laughed to himself one last time. He had the killer point, he was the winner...

After all, Vera and her fat Arnold were still stuck with each other...*forever*. Even if they got off this assassin mountain; even if the cold didn't get them; or the snow blindness; or they lost all their fingers and noses; even if they somehow survived the night and the storm; they were bound to each other forever, this scum bitch and this greasy little wart! *I win! I win!*

Thought Charlie Kennoy, still falling.

NIGHT VIGIL

Darkness seeped in around the little quonset. It oozed out of the deeps of space and swirled around Ferreno's home. The automatic scanners turned and turned, whispering quietly, their message of wariness unconsciously reassuring the old man.

He bent over and plucked momentarily at a bit of lint on the carpet. It was the only speck of foreign matter on the rug, reflecting the old man's perpetual cleanliness and almost fanatical neatness.

The racks of bookspools were all binding-to-binding, set flush with the lip of the shelves; the bed was made with a military tightness that allowed a coin to bounce high three times; the walls were free of fingerprints—dusted and wiped clean twice a day; there was no speck of lint or dust on anything in the one room quonset.

When Ferreno had flicked the single bit of matter from his fingers, into the incinerator, the place was immaculate.

It reflected twenty-four years of watching, waiting, and living alone. Living alone on the edge of Forever, waiting for something that might never come. Tending blind, dumb machines that could say *Something is out here*, but also said, *We don't know what it is*.

Ferreno returned to his pneumo-chair, sank heavily into it, and blinked, his deep-set grey eyes seeking into the furthest rounded corner of the quonset's ceiling. His eyes seemed to be looking for something. But there was nothing there he did not already know. Far too well.

He had been on this asteroid, this spot lost in the darkness, for twenty-four years. In that time, nothing had happened.

There had been no warmth, no women, no feeling, and only a brief flurry of emotion for almost twenty of those twenty-four years.

Ferreno had been a young man when they had set him down on The Stone. They had pointed out there and said to him:

"Beyond the farthest spot you can see, there's an island universe. In that island universe, there's an enemy, Ferreno. One day he'll become tired of his home and come after yours.

"You're here to watch for him."

And they had gone before he could ask them.

Ask them: who *were* the enemy? Where would they come from, and why was he here, alone, to stop them? What could he do if they

came? What were the huge, silent machines that bulked monstrous behind the little quonset? Would he ever go home again?

All he had known was the intricate dialing process for the inverspace communicators. The tricky-fingered method of sending a coded response half across the galaxy to a waiting Mark LXXXII brain—waiting only for his frantic pulsations.

He had known only that. The dialing process and the fact that he was to watch. Watch for he-knew-not-what!

There at first he had thought he would go out of his mind. It had been the monotony. Monotony intensified to a frightening degree. The ordeal of watching, watching, watching. Sleeping, eating from the self-replenishing supply of protofoods in the greentank, reading, sleeping again, re-reading the bookspools till their casings crackled, snapped, and lost panes. The re-binding—and re-re-reading. The horror of knowing every passage of a book by heart.

He could recite from Stendhal's *LE ROUGE ET LE NOIR* and Hemingway's *DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON* and Melville's *MOBY DICK*, till the very words lost meaning, sounded strange and unbelievable to his ears.

First had come living in filth and throwing things against the curving walls and ceilings. Things designed to give, and bounce—but not to break. Walls designed to absorb the impact of a flung drink-ball or a smashed fist. Then had come the extreme neatness, then a moderation, and finally back to the neat, prissy fastidiousness of an old man who wants to know where everything is at any time.

No women. That had been a persistent horror for the longest time. A mounting pain in his groin and belly, that had wakened him during the arbitrary night, swimming in his own sweat, his mouth and body aching. He had gotten over it slowly. He had even attempted emasculation. None of it had worked, of course, and it had only passed away with his youth.

He had taken to talking to himself. And answering himself. Not madness, just the fear that the ability to speak might be lost.

Madness had descended many times during the early years. The blind, clawing urgency to get out! Get out into the airless vastness of The Stone. At least to die, to end this nowhere existence.

But they had constructed the quonset without a door. The plasteel-sealed slit his deliverers had gone out had been closed irrevocably behind them, and there *was* no way out.

Madness had come often.

But they had selected him wisely. He clung to his sanity, for he knew it was his only escape. He knew it would be a far more horrible thing to end out his days in this quonset a helpless maniac, than to

remain sane.

He swung back over the line and soon grew content with his world in a shell. He waited, for there was nothing else he could do; and in his waiting a contentment grew out of frantic restlessness. He began to think of it as a jail, then as a coffin, then as the ultimate black of the Final Hole. He would wake in the arbitrary night, choking, his throat constricted, his hands warped into claws that crooked themselves into the foam rubber of the sleeping couch with fierceness.

The time was spent. A moment after it had passed, he could not tell *how* it had been spent. His life became dust-dry and at times he could hardly tell he *was* living. Had it not been for the protected, automatic calendar, he would hardly have known the years were passing.

And ever, ever, ever—the huge, dull, sleeping eye of the warning buzzer. Staring back at him, veiled, from the ceiling.

It was hooked up with the scanners. The scanners that hulked behind the quonset. The scanners in turn were hooked up to the net of tight inverspace rays that interlocked each other out to the farthest horizon Ferreno might ever know.

And the net, in turn, joined at stop-gap functions with the doggie-guards, also waiting, watching with dumb metal and plastic minds for that implacable alien enemy that might some day come.

They had known the enemy would come, for they had found the remnants of those the enemy had destroyed. Remnants of magnificent and powerful cultures, ground to microscopic dust by the heel of a terrifying invader.

They could not chance roaming the universe with those Others somewhere. Somewhere...waiting. They had formed the inverspace net, joining it with the doggie-guards. And they had hooked the system in with the scanners; and they had wired the scanners to the big, dull eye in the ceiling of the quonset.

Then they had set Ferreno to watching it.

At first Ferreno had watched the thing constantly. Waiting for it to make the disruptive noise he was certain it would emit. Breaking the perpetual silence of his bubble. He waited for the bloodiness of its blink to warp fantastic shadows across the room and furniture. He even spent five months deciding what shape those shadows would take, when they came.

Then he entered the period of nervousness. Jumping for no reason at all, to stare at the eye. The hallucinations: it was blinking, it was ringing in his ears. The sleeplessness: it might go off and he would not

hear it.

Then as time progressed, he grew unaware of it, forgot it existed for long periods. Till it had finally come to the knowledge that it was there; a dim thing, an unremembered thing, as much a part of him as his own ears, his own eyes. He had nudged it to the back of his mind—but it was always there.

Always there, always waiting, always on the verge of disruption.

Ferreno never forgot why he was there. He never forgot the reason they had come for him. *The day they had come for him.*

The evening had been pale and laden with sound. The flits clacking through the air above the city, the crickets in the grass, the noise of holograph from the living room of the house.

He had been sitting on the front porch, arms tight about his girl, on a creaking porch glider that smacked the wall every time they rocked back too far. He remembered the taste of the sweet-acidy lemonade in his mouth as the three men resolved out of the gloom.

They had stepped onto the porch.

“Are you Charles Jackson Ferreno, age nineteen, brown hair, brown eyes, five feet ten, 158 pounds, scar on right inner wrist?”

“Y-yes...why?” he had stammered.

The intrusion of these strangers on a thing as private as his love-making had caused him to falter.

Then they had grabbed him.

“What are you doing? Get your hands off him!” Marie had screamed.

They had flashed an illuminated card at her, and she had subsided into terrified silence before their authority. Then they had taken him, howling, into a flit—black and silent—and whirled him off to the plasteel block in the Nevada desert that had been Central Space Headquarters.

They had hypno-conditioned him to operate the inverspace communicators. A task he could not have learned in two hundred years—involving the billion alternate dialing choices—had they not planted it mechanically.

Then they had prepared him for the ship.

“Why are you doing this to me? Why have you picked me!” he had screamed at them, fighting the lacing-up of the pressure suit.

They had told him. The Mark LXXXII. He had been chosen best out of forty-seven thousand punched cards whipped through its platinum vitals. Best by selection. An infallible machine had said he was the least susceptible to madness, inefficiency, failure. He was the best, and the Service needed him.

Then, the ship.

The nose of the beast pointed straight up into a cloudless sky, blue and unfilmed as the best he had ever known. Then a rumble, and a scream, and the pressure as the ship had raced into space. And the almost imperceptible wrenching as the ship slipped scud wise through inverspace. The travel through the milky pinkness of that not-space. Then the gut-pulling again, and *there!* off to the right through the port—that bleak little asteroid with its quonset blemish.

When they had set him down and told him about the enemy, he had screamed at them, but they had pushed him back into the bubble, had sealed the pressure-lock, and had gone back to the ship.

They had left The Stone, then. Rushing up till they had popped out of sight around a bend in space.

His hands had been bloodied, beating against the resilient plasteel of the pressure-lock and the vista windows.

He never forgot why he was there.

He tried to conjure up the enemy. Were they horrible slug-like creatures from some dark star, ready to spread a ring of viscous, poisonous fluid inside Earth's atmosphere; were they tentacled spider-men who drank blood; were they perhaps quiet, well-mannered beings who would sublimate all of man's drives and ambitions; were they...

He went on and on, till it did not matter in the slightest to him. Then he forgot time. But he remembered he was here to watch. To watch and wait. A sentinel at the gate of the Forever, waiting for an unknown enemy that might streak out of nowhere bound for Earth and destruction. Or that might have died out millenia before—leaving him here on a worthless assignment, doomed to an empty life.

He began to hate. The hate of the men who had consigned him to this living death. He hated the men who had brought him here in their ship. He hated the men who had conceived the idea of a sentinel. He hated the Mark computer that had said:

“Get Charles Jackson Ferreno *only!*”

He hated them all. But most of all he hated the alien enemy. The implacable enemy that had thrown fear into the hearts of the men.

Ferreno hated them all with a bitter obsession verging on madness itself. Then, the obsession passed. Even that passed.

Now he was an old man. His hands and face and neck wrinkled with the skin-folding of age. His eyes had sunk back under ridges of flesh, his eyebrows white as the stars. His hair loose and uncombed, trimmed raggedly by an ultra-safe shaving device he had not been able to adapt for suicide. A beard of unkempt and foul proportions. A

body slumped into a position that fitted his pneumo-chair exactly.

Thoughts played leap-frog with themselves. Ferreno was thinking. For the first time in eight years—since the last hallucination had passed—actually thinking. He sat humped into the pneumo-chair that had long ago formed itself permanently to his posture. The muted strains of some long since over-familiarized piece of taped music humming above him. Was the horrible repetition Vivaldi's *Gloria Mass* or a snatch of Monteverdi? He fumbled in the back of his mind, in the recess this music had lived for so long—consigned there by horrible repetition.

His thoughts veered before he found the answer. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the watching.

Beads of perspiration sprang out, dotting his upper lip and the receding arcs of sparse hair at his temples.

What if they never came?

What if they had gone already and through some failure of the mechanisms he had missed them? Even the subliminal persistence of the revolving scanners' workings was not assurance enough. For the first time in many years he was hearing the scanners again, and did they sound right?

Didn't...they...sound...a...bit...off?

They didn't sound right! My God, all these years and now they weren't working! He had no way of repairing them, no way of getting out of here, he was doomed to lie here till he died—his purpose gone! Oh My God! All these years here nowhere and my youth gone and they've stopped running and no-good damned things failing now and the aliens've slipped through and Earth's gone and I'm no good here and it's all for nothing and Marie and everything...

Ferreno! Good God, man! Stop yourself!

He grabbed control of himself abruptly, lurchingly. The machines were perfect. They worked on the basic substance of inverspace. They *couldn't* go wrong, once set running on the pattern.

But the uselessness of it all remained.

His head fell into his shaking hands. He felt tears bubbling behind his eyes. What could one puny man do here, away from all and everyone? They had told him more than one man would be dangerous. They would kill each other out of sheer boredom. The same for a man and a woman. Only one man could remain in possession of his senses, to tickle out the intricate warning on the inverspace communicator.

He recalled again what they had said about relief.

There could be none. Once sealed in, a man had begun the fight with himself. If they took him out and put in another man, they were

upping the chances of a miscalculation—and a failure. By picking the very best man by infallible computer, they were putting all their eggs in one basket—but they were cutting risk to the bone.

He recalled again what they had said about a machine in his place.

Impossible. A robot brain, equipped to perform that remarkable task of sorting the warning factors, and recording it on the inverspace communicators—including any possible ramifications that might crop up in fifty years—would have to be fantastically large.

It would have had to be five hundred miles long by three hundred wide. With tapes and back-up circuits and tranversistors and punch-checks that, if laid end to end, would have reached halfway from The Stone to Earth.

He knew he was necessary, which had been one of the things that had somehow stopped him from finding a way to wreck himself or the whole quonset during those twenty-four years.

Yet, it still seemed so worthless, so helpless, no unnecessary. He didn't know, but he was certain the quonset bubble would inform them if he died or was helpless. Then they would try again.

He was necessary, if...

If the enemy was coming. *If* the enemy hadn't already passed him by. *If* the enemy hadn't died long ago. *If, if, if!*

He felt the madness walking again, like some horrible monster of the mind.

He pressed it back with cool argument.

He knew, deep inside himself, that he was a symbol. A gesture of desperation. A gesture of survival to the peoples of Earth. They wanted to live. But did they have to sacrifice him for their survival?

He could not come to an answer within himself.

Perhaps it was inevitable. Perhaps not. Either way, it just happened he had been the man.

Here at this junction of the galaxies; in this spot of most importance; here he was the key to a battle that must someday be fought.

But what if he was wasted? What if they never came? What if there was no enemy at all? Only supposition by the learned ones. Tampering with the soul and life of a human being!

God! The horror of the thought! What if...

A soft buzz accompanied the steady ruby glow from the eye in the ceiling. Ferreno stared, open-mouthed. He could not look up at the eye itself. He stared at the bloody film that covered the walls and floor of the quonset. This was the time he had waited twenty-four years to come!

Was this it? No strident noises, no flickering urgency of the red

light. Only a steady glow and a soft buzz.

And at the same time he knew that this was far more effective. It had prevented his death from heart attack.

Then he tried to move. Tried to finger the forty-three keys of the inverspace communicator on the underarm of the pneumo-chair. Tried to translate the message the way it had been impressed sub-cortically in his mind, in a way he could never have done consciously.

He was frozen in his seat.

He couldn't move. His hands would not respond to the frantic orders of his brain. The keys lay silent under the chair arm, the warning unsent. He was totally incapacitated. What if this was a dud? What if the machines were breaking down from the constant twenty-four years of use? Twenty-four years—and how many men before him? What if this was merely another hallucination? What if he was going insane at last?

He couldn't take the chance. His mind blocked him off. The fear was there. He couldn't be wrong, and send the warning now, crying wolf!

Then he saw it, and he knew it was not a dud.

Far out in the ever-dark dark of the space beyond The Stone, he could see a spreading point of light piercing the ebony of the void. And he knew. A calmness covered him.

Now he knew it had not been waste. This was the culmination of all the years of waiting. The privation, the hunger of loneliness, the torture of boredom, all of it. It was worth suffering all that.

He reached under, and closed his eyes, letting his hypno-training take over. His fingers flickered momentarily over the forty-three keys.

That done, he settled back, letting his thoughts rest on the calmed surface of his mind. He watched the spreading points of light in the vista window, knowing it was an armada advancing without pause on Earth.

He was content. He would soon die, and his job would be finished. It was worth all the years without. Without anything good he would have known on Earth. But it was worth all of it. The struggle for life was coming to his people.

His night vigil was finally ended.

The enemy was coming at last.

XENOGENESIS: AN ESSAY

The front door of my home is beautiful beyond the describing of it. Created for me many years ago by two fine sculptors, Mabel and Milon Hutchinson, whose work equals in style and gorgeousness the finest woodworking of Louise Nevelson, it is a construct of “found” woodblocks and assorted other pieces. Mabel is quite, quite old now, but she still lives, tended by some of her most loving students, in Capistrano Beach, California. Milon died in 1977, leaving Mabel alone after fifty years of love. He was seventy-two when he passed over. I admired and loved them both, and the beauty they brought to my life and my home never dims.

One Friday night in 1979, I appeared on a radio show well known in Los Angeles: *Hour 25*, hosted by Mike Hodel. It's a science fiction program that covers film and television as well as print media, and on that evening in 1979 I gave my opinion of the first *Star Trek* movie, which I had seen the night before. It didn't deserve much kindness, that film, and I was not very kind in my remarks.

After the show, and after Mike and I had gone for our usual pie, coffee and chat at DuPar's, I came home around one o'clock. It was dark in the entrance way to my home, and I unlocked the beautiful door Mabel and Milon had made for me, entered the house, and closed the door. I went to bed.

Next day was a Saturday, and unusual for my secretary to come in, but she had something to finish, and when she showed up at ten o'clock, she said, “What happened to the front door?”

With a soft, nasty, melting feeling in my chest, I went to the front door and opened it.

In the night, probably while I was still at the radio station, someone had thrown several dozen eggs on that work of art. It took many days to clean off the mess, from the hundreds of surfaces and interstitial crevices. I could not concentrate on writing while the door was wounded. I picked and scoured and worked at it with toothbrushes and polish till the day grew dark. Finally, it came as clean as I could get it, but the egg had dried overnight and today the door remains discolored in some places, scored in others where my cleaning marred the surfaces.

Every time I unlock my front door, I hope that if Mabel comes to

visit, it will be at night. For her, in the last years of her life, the art that she and Milon produced is solitary balm for her loss. I could not bear to see her expression if she were to see the ravages done to that important bit of her past. I think of the pithecanthropoid fan who slung those eggs, and I also hope I never find out which one it was.

My friend James Blish died in 1975.

Here is an extract from a letter I wrote to M. John Harrison—Mike Harrison, the brilliant English author of the Virconium novels—on July 31st of that year:

Dear Mike:

By now, of course, you know Jim passed away. I was planning to fly to England to see him. I'd been meaning to do it for almost a year but the usual nonsense work-load and deadlines and personal bullshit prevented the journey. I'd decided I was coming early in August, but when I wrote Jim and Judy, and then followed it up with a phone call earlier this month, Judy told me August might be too late.

I'd dedicated a new book to him. I sent him a copy of the dedication page. He wrote me back about two weeks ago...maybe the last thing he ever did write...I don't know...and he was so damned tough, so bloody Jim, as he'd always been, saying he was feeling better and he was delighted I was, at last, coming to visit; that I should stay on a long while and we'd catch up on the past few years during which we hadn't seen or communicated with each other too much. He was thrilled with the dedication to SHATTERDAY and he not only signed my personal copy of AGAIN, DANGEROUS VISIONS that I'd packed up and sent, but he'd been thoughtful enough to get it signed by Josephine Saxton—there on a weekend visit—thereby saving me another transatlantic shipping. Even at the last, in pain, and having difficulty writing, he'd been capable of one more act of friendship and concern: something that had always been his hallmark.

But now he's gone. And I missed the final appointment. The long and endlessly fascinating conversation Jim Blish held with the world is ended, and I miss him terribly.

Mike replied, and like so many others that dark Autumn, he wanted to share his sorrow at Jim's death. I wrote him in response on August 12th:

Thanks for the note. I appreciate your words. (How odd: Judy Blish actually sustains the loss, and here are we, getting strokes on the passing of Jim. What miserable little creatures we are, wallowing in other people's sorrow just to enable us to tolerate our pain.)

I'd thought I had it all contained, and today Judy's letter came and she said, "Jim loved you. He always said so," and I fell apart again. I'm not a sentimental type, god knows, but there is some part of me that feels an inconsolable loss at the going of that dear man who taught me so much. Christ, it's awful.

Within three weeks of my sending that letter to Mike Harrison, I received from New York the most recent (at that time) of a series of hate letters from an unsigned correspondent who had been poisoning my mailbox with his vicious notes for almost two years. His note read, in part:

I understand James Blish died. You know he was a publicity flack for the tobacco industry for many years and I understand he died of cancer of the throat. That's real poetic justice, don't you think? One more of you phonies down, pretty soon it will be your turn.

For years I did not know who was behind those letters sans name or address, except that they were all postmarked out of New York City and they were obviously from someone who was very familiar with science fiction and fandom, someone who knew what I was doing on a continuing basis, and someone who probably subscribed to *Locus*.

For years I saved all the letters, in a file labeled "Mr. X." Then one day in late 1983, it chanced that a piece of mail addressed to The Harlan Ellison Record Collection was shown to me by the then-Director of The Collection, Shelley Levinson. I forget now why she showed me that note, as I seldom see correspondence sent to that arm of The Kilimanjaro Corporation. But when I began reading the letter, I could not see the words, I could see only the typewriter face that suddenly I recognized from protracted and intense scrutiny of Mr. X's vile communiqués. Peculiarities of some of the letters as they'd been typed seemed familiar. I rushed upstairs to my office and pulled the file. Yes, the "t" had a broken cross-bar; the "q" had a loop filled with gunk that reproduced solid black; the "r" on the machine had settled, appearing slightly below the level of all the other letters.

I checked the membership roster of The Collection and found that

Mr. X—whose identity had been sedulously disguised for ten years—was Norman Epstein, who lived at 110 East 36th Street in New York, New York 10016. His phone number was (212) 679-8092. He had been one of the earliest members of The Collection, and had received every newsletter issued by The Collection. Records of purchases showed he had bought first editions of my books at inflated prices.

I called him. Late one night. Very late one night.

“Mr. Epstein?”

A sleepy, querulous “Yes?”

“This is Harlan Ellison, Mr. Epstein.”

A worried, startled “Uh...”

“For a long time now you’ve been having fun with me, haven’t you, Mr. Epstein?”

A slow, reluctant “I guess so.”

Well, that was because you knew where I was, and who I am; but now I know who *you are*, and *where* you are. Now I start having some fun with you, Mr. Epstein. And as nasty as your sense of humor is, mine is plain downright ugly. I’m a winner, Norman, and nothing is beneath me to make the other guy lose. *You’re* the other guy, Norman, You’ll be hearing from me. Not immediately, but soon. Soon, Norman. I look forward to it.

He began babbling, trying to tell me it was all a gag, that he meant no harm. But I had the dozens and dozens of his wretched little notes in front of me, the ones that defamed Phil Farmer and Damon Knight and other of my friends. I was easily able to dip down into the well of memory and bring back the anxiety and frustration I felt each day one of those unmarked envelopes appeared in the mail. The fury of not being able to respond! His cowardly anonymity! I hung up on him. I never learned his motivation for spending so much time and nastiness harassing me.

Norman Epstein has changed his phone number.

He’s done it several times.

Do you have any idea how easy it is to ferret out a new, unlisted number, particularly if you represent yourself to Nynex, the New York Telephone Company, as Detective-Lieutenant Hemphill of the Los Angeles Police Department?

When I sat down to write this article on June 6th, 1984, I had not heard from Norman Epstein for the many months since I’d spoken to him, very late that night. As I finished typing the preceding paragraph, the mail arrived. I went downstairs and brought it in. Atop the stack, a mere five minutes ago (as I sat writing *this* paragraph), was a postcard—without return address, postmarked New York—that read as follows:

Harlan, I liked Stalking the Nightmare very much. Keep writing.

—Best wishes, Norman Epstein

With charming familiarity, he has signed it Norman.

Have you ever noticed how few people in this life know whats good for them?

Soon, Norman. I look forward to it.

In biology there is a phenomenon known as xenogenesis. It is a pathological state in which the child does not resemble the parent. You may remember a fairly grisly 1975 film by my pal Larry Cohen titled *Its Alive!* in which a fanged and taloned baby gnaws its way out of its mothers womb and slaughters the attending nurses and gynecologist in the delivery room and then leaps straight up through a skylight, smashes out, and for the duration of the film crawls in and out of the frame ripping peoples throats. Its natural father is a CPA or something similar. Most CPAs do not, other than symbolically, have fangs and talons. Xenogenesis.

In the subculture of science fiction literature and its umbilically attached aficionados, we have the manifestation of a symbiotic relationship in which the behavior of the children, that is, the fans, does not resemble the noble ideals set forth in the writings and pronouncements of the parents, the writers. For all its apocalyptic doomsaying, its frequent pointing with alarm, its gardyloos of caution, the literature of imagination has ever and always promoted an ethic of good manners and kindness via its viewpoint characters. The ones we are asked to relate to, in sf and fantasy, the ones we are urged to see as the Good Folks, are usually the ones who say excuse me and thank you maam.

The most efficient narrative shorthand to explain why a particular character is the one struck by cosmic lightning or masticated by some nameless Lovecraftian horror is to paint that character as rude, insensitive, paralogical or slovenly.

Through this free-floating auctorial trope, the canon has promulgated as salutary an image of mannerliness, rectitude and humanism, The smart alecks, slugs, slimeworts and snipers of the universe in these fables unfailingly reap a terrible comeuppance.

That is the attitude of the parents, for the most part.

Yet the children of this ongoing education, the fans who incorporate the canon as a significant part of their world-view, frequently demonstrate a cruelty that would, in the fiction, bring them a reward of Job-like awfulness.

One demur, herewith offered, but doomed to be ignored or misinterpreted: *not all fans are malevolent*. Let me repeat: there are many wonderful fans. Kindness, courtesy and self-sacrifice are as frequent, as common, among fans as flowers in the spring. In more than thirty years of linkage with sf and its fandom, I have made friends whose decency and support have made life (infinitely) more tenable. Casual generousities and life-saving assistance have ever been available to me, not only from those I know well, but through the good offices of readers I've never met, random acquaintances at conventions, passersby who saw an opportunity for largesse and leaped at the chance to be of aid. What I say here will, please note, exclude all the Good Guys. They know who they are. I'll say it a third time, and hope the message gets through: I speak here not of *all* fans!

The ones who will produce static at this essay are the ones whose consciences chew on them. The ones who will pillory the messenger serve their own secret agenda. They feel guilty, so they will try to behead the messenger. Nonetheless, what we deal with in this tract are the ones known to us all...the rude, the vicious, the stunned and the insensitive. And they *don't* know who they are, because the very meanspiritedness and playground bully cruelty that marks them also poisons them with an arrogance that prevents their perceiving how vile they are to the rest of us, how embarrassing they are to the preponderance of decent and gracious men and women who make up the literary support-group we call fandom.

What you will confront in these pages is the colony of grubs that has already driven too many writers and artists from the company of the rest of us; the maggots whose random and irrational gaffes have compelled those we come to conventions to meet, to say, "No more. I can't face another weekend with those creeps!" (Or haven't you wondered why you never see Stephen King at conventions these days?)

They are the result of xenogenesis. They are the ones who yell *Jump!* at the damned soul on the ledge. They are the meaning of arrested adolescence. They are the canker on your rose, the worm in your apple. And the rest of you, the fans and readers, have to stand the gaff for their leprous behavior. And here is the litany.

One fan who was invited into my home stole more than two thousand dollars worth of rare comic books during a period of more than six months of friendly visits. Another fan walked off with the virtually irreplaceable Shasta Press books that bear Hannes Bok covers, all of them in mint condition, all of them bearing my bookplates. Yet

another fan I caught as she walked out the front door of my house, with the first three issues of *Unknown* in her tote bag. And there was one who pocketed as memento of his visit, a collectible pinback button from the old Kellogg's Pep cereal series of comic book characters, Annie's dog, Sandy. Another relieved me of the worry of winding a wristwatch sent to me by an executive of the Bulova company; an instrument produced in the number of two: one I owned, the other belonging to Winston Churchill. Another took a leisurely riffle through my files in the dead of night while the rest of the household was asleep, and got away with a series of original letters from the author of THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE, B. Traven, as well as the carbons of my letters to him in Mexico. And still another managed to cop—one by one, under his shirt—several dozen first editions that I'd bought new in the mid-fifties, when I'd been a fan myself, and had started collecting, paying for the books by saving lunch money. At the Kansas City Worldcon a number of years ago, a fan who still comes to conventions showed up at a party in my room and stole the only Virgil Finlay artwork I've ever been able to find for a reasonable purchase price.

These are not isolated instances of theft so casually performed that the question of morality never occurs to the footpad. If you want to hear other such tales, speak to Forrest J. Ackerman, whose home has been robbed again and again by young fans he's been kind enough to show through his vast collection. Or speak to Lydia Marano of the Dangerous Visions Bookstore in Sherman Oaks, California, or Sherry Gottlieb of A Change of Hobbit in Santa Monica, or *any* dealer or bookstore owner at any convention you ever attend.

I didn't know Slans had such taking ways.

A fan from the Seattle area pulled the subscription coupons from more than fifty magazines ranging from *Good Housekeeping* to *Hustler*, typed in my name and address, and signed me up for subscriptions. Have you ever tried to get *Time* magazine to stop sending you its journal, and billing you endlessly? Have you ever received twelve dunning letters from bill collection agencies for goods you never requested, all in one day? Have you ever considered how much time and money you expend calling computerized subscription services in Colorado, trying to get them to trace where bogus subscription coupons came from?

And the ugliness of that fan's nature reveals itself in an additional little twist put on the scam. Each subscription was made in the name

of *another* science fiction professional...Isaac Asimov or Stephen King or...well, here, take a look at this bogus gift subscription returned to me by the *National Review* fulfillment department: Thus, each stone bruises at least two of us. Casual, sidebar wickedness; and the creep thinks it's cute. The subscription was sent to an approximation of my address, to "Helen Arlison." Yeah...cute.

But the prank went further: the fan also ordered a raft of expensive art items from The Franklin Mint, signed me up for the Columbia Tape Club, for whole series' of porcelain figurines and vases from the Collectors' Society, for albums of country and western golden oldies, for junk mail addressed to pet shops, for catalogues of clothing, women's lingerie, computer supplies, yachting equipment, farm implements. In one week I received six Slim Whitman albums. In the space of one year I had to hire an assistant at considerable cost, just to handle the cornucopial flow of magazines, catalogues, unordered product, retail credit demands and time-wasting problems this single fan visited on me.

I am not alone in suffering thus. This has happened to almost every writer I've queried. They have asked me not to use their names. Monkey-see, monkey-do: they're afraid a few of you might not yet have had this perverted behavior occur to you, that once you learn of it, you'll do it to them. They're *afraid* of you; what does that tell you?

And each company that received my name sold the name and the address to a dozen *other* mail order companies whose unsolicited junk mail jammed my mailbox every day. I came to dread the arrival of the postal truck.

There was the fool who signed me up for every book club in America, from the Literary Guild to the Time-Life Library of World War II. We had stacks of unordered books to return every day for six months. Consider the packing, the trips to the post office. Consider what happens to one's writing schedule!

There was the jerk who registered me for lonely hearts clubs, organizations that supply the names of Oriental women who want to become American brides, computer dating firms, pen pal associations, porn photo outfits that run ads that say, "Hi, I'm Rhonda, and if you'd like to see candid, full-front shots of me and my friend Roxanne, doing what we like to do best, just send us fifteen dollars and your special wants; we'll do the rest."

There was the monster who anonymously called the police when I was living in New York in 1960, and told them I had an apartment filled with drugs and weapons, and on a quiet day recorded in my book MEMOS FROM PURGATORY, I was arrested and taken off to the Manhattan holding tanks called the Tombs, and though there wasn't so much as a NoDoz tablet in my apartment, I was arraigned and had

to go before the Grand Jury.

Amusing. All terribly amusing. Each little high school prank a giggle. And how many hours spent cleaning up these unnecessary contretemps might have been spent producing more stories? How many hours wasted, how many books lost, unwritten? Now multiply what has happened to me, the hours lost, by the number of writers who've had this kind of crap pulled on them, too. A writer has only talent, a finite amount of visceral material, and a little time...never enough time. Amusing.

They are cowardly little scum, these brain-damage cases who demean honest fans by calling themselves aficionados of the literature of imagination. They spread the gossip behind your back, they make the snide remarks as they zip past you in the convention halls, they put no return address on the vile letters, they make up false names when they write the hate letters to the magazines that run your stories, they use the telephone. For them, courage and rational behavior are alien concepts only to be read about in slambang space operas. Such concepts do not impinge upon their miserable lives in the real world.

This essay came into being one evening at a reception given for John Brunner during one of his visits to Los Angeles. At that gathering, I found myself sitting at a kitchen table with Robert Bloch, Philip José Farmer and the late Kris Neville. We were discussing what had happened to me the night before.

I had only recently, at that time, begun living with a woman I'd met in Boston. She had come out to L.A. to stay with me, and we had gone to see the Woody Allen film *Stardust Memories*. In one scene of the movie, Woody, playing himself in the role of a world-famous comedy director, attends one of those film weekends held all-too-frequently at resort hotels in the Poconos. He is swamped by pushy, impertinent, gauche and sycophantic fans of his work. They chivvy and harass him; and at one point a woman stridently demands he autograph her hand. When he refuses she gets insulting.

I leaned over to whisper to my new friend from Boston, "That's my life you're looking at."

She laughed at me, and later, when we had left the theater, she accused me of unjustified self-importance and advised me that even though she was from Boston, she hadn't fallen off the turnip truck the day before. I smiled and said no more.

Two nights later, on the Friday before the reception for John Brunner, I had to speak at a fund-raising event for imprisoned writers

in Latin American nations, sponsored by P.E.N., the international journalism society, and as we sat in the front row waiting for the event to begin, a stout woman behind us gave a hoot, clamped a paw on my shoulder, and demanded, “Are you Harlan Ellison?”

I turned with fear, saw this behemoth apparition, and acknowledged reluctantly that I was, indeed, that doomed soul. My new friend from Boston also turned, her eyes wide, as the woman proclaimed, with the rustic charm of a farmhand calling in the hogs, “I’ve read everything you’ve ever written! I love your stuff! Here, sign my breast!” And she wrenched aside her ruffled top to expose a mammary the size and richness of Latvia. My lady friend stared with horror, then looked at me and blurted, “Jeeeeeezus, you weren’t kidding, were you?”

I was discussing this not-uncommon event with Kris and Phil and Bob, at John’s reception, and in fun we began telling each other of the horror scenes we’d gone through with fans.

Kris Neville regaled us with a story of pyramiding impositions by a young male fan who had come to pay homage, culminating in his taking up residence on Kris and Lil’s front lawn until they were forced to call the juvenile authorities.

Bob’s most bizarre fan story involved the receipt, one day in the mail, of a birthday card from an unknown enthusiast who had attached to the felicitation, a green gemstone. Bob tossed the card with rock attached, into a junk drawer. Years later, when the drawer’s contents were sent to one of the university archives that preserve the papers of famous writers, Bob received a call from the curator who advised him that they’d had the stone appraised, and it was valued at seven thousand dollars.

On the day I sat down to write this essay, June 6th, 1984, apart from the Epstein postcard mentioned earlier, and hundreds of other items of postal wonderfulness, I received a letter from one Leroy Jones of Philadelphia. His request was not unlike hundreds of similar missives I receive in a year. It was as follows, and I quote directly from the scrawled note before me:

Dear Mr. Ellison—

I collect quotes of authors (sic) works. Could you please pen a few dozen quotes from your work on the enclosed cards. I’m only 16 so have not read too much on you. I’m not sure I’d like all you write but I know you have done a movie The Oscar and I saw that. I need some quotes.

—Thanks, Leroy.

When I saw that note, with its casual impertinences and its gratuitous rudeness and its utter lack of understanding of the value of time to a writer, I thought, *I can't be the only poor devil who gets this lunacy every day.*

And I remembered the conversation with Kris and Phil and Bob, and I put together a letter that I Xeroxed and sent off to eighty-five writers and artists of my acquaintance. The letter was an imposition precisely of the kind I despise most, and so I made it very clear *passim* the copy that this was a lark, a frippery, an amusement, and if it interfered with the recipient's writing in even the smallest way, it was to be ignored.

The letter read as follows:

Companions in Suffering:

This is a minuscule request for a bit of data. If it's convenient, respond. If you're busy, forget it. It's strictly by way of a small favor, and if it imposes at all, just smile and toss it. No guilt attaches to a no-response. Honest, folks.

What it is, is this:

Your friend and mine, that little dickens Ed Bryant, somewhichway conned me into being the guest of honor at Westercon 37 up in Portland (29 June–3 July). As you may know, I look on the prospect of appearing naked at conventions with all the joy I reserve for root canal surgery. Nonetheless, I said I'd do it, so I'll do it. Smiling all the way.

But for my "guest of honor speech" I would like to present a talk that came to me as a lark during a conversation one night with Phil Farmer, Bob Bloch and the late Kris Neville. We were shootin' the breeze, us old hands, around the kitchen table at a party thrown for John Brunner, and we began exchanging horror stories of the most bizarre things fans had done to us through our long and exhausting careers.

I can't remember the weird stories Phil told, but there were at least half a dozen of them, about impositions (like this one) on his time and sanity by malign or simply overzealous readers. Kris told a story about some kid who took up residence on his front lawn. Bob remembered someone had sent him a birthday card with a green gemstone pasted on it, which he tossed in a drawer and which, years later, while preparing some papers for one of the university archives, he sent along; he received an alarmed call from the curator of records that they'd had this frippery appraised, and it was worth about seven grand!

As for me, and what fans who've never met me but have decided I'm loathsome, have done...don't ask. The worst was not the ass who signed

me up for fifty book clubs, who ordered goods in my name that had to be returned, who subscribed me to dozens of magazines from Time to Crocheting. The worst was not the fool who entered my phone number in his college's computer, with a program that had calls being made six or eight times a day, with immediate disconnect, thus waking me at 5 AM, getting me off the potty at high noon, driving my secretary crazy. The worst was not the jerk who egged my front door. The worst was not...

Well, you get the idea.

The point of all this is that I want to present a speech (that can later be written up as an article to be read by the mass of fans lurking out there waiting for all of us) with so much weight of actual anecdote, so filled with the intentional and unintentional crap we all have to endure as part of "the business," that perhaps it will deter a few of the little sophomoric darlings.

Now many of you take it all stoically. I've talked to some of you and you shrug, you smile, and say "what the hell." One well-known lady swears she loves every fan who reads her books and she really doesn't mind at all that they call her when she's at the business of working on a novel. I don't believe her, but...what the hell. I'm addressing the rest of you, who have had experiences that make the eyes water and the mind reel.

I ask that you jot down your anecdote as fully or briefly as you choose—and pick your most unbelievable horror story—and send it to me as soon as it's convenient. If you don't want your name mentioned, well, I'll reluctantly but sedulously abide by your wishes, though use of your famous name will have more impact, of course. Just add that caveat, and I'll respect your privacy.

Just grab a piece of second sheet and dash it off, if you will.

It's nothing that you owe me, or anything that will put a penny in your pocket, but mayhap it will pay off in saving you just one looneytune intruding on your life.

I'll send along a Xerox of the finished piece, of course; and any smallest effort you expend in aid of this project will win you my undying thanks. But since I just turned fifty, that "undying" part may not mean a diddly-bit.

In any case, thanks for letting me intrude as the looneytunes do.

—Thanks, folks.
Harlan

I thought perhaps I'd get one or two responses from my closest friends, maybe Silverberg or David Gerrold, maybe Ed Bryant and Vonda McIntyre. What I did not expect was the instantaneous tidal wave, the floodrush, the tsunami of responses from people I hadn't heard from in years, each one recounting a horror more unbelievable than the one preceding.

I will recount some of them here. Most have the names of the

victims attached. A few, of the most horrible, do not: the true and actual anguish that came from these incidents remains, and I have been asked by the tellers of these tales not to specify into whose lives this shittrain fell.

One more interesting sidebar.

Almost without exception, every letter begins, as does, say, Isaac Asimov's response: "Dear Harlan, In general, my readers are a very nice bunch of people who virtually never impose," and then *every single one of them* goes on, in the second paragraph, to say, "However there was this *one* fan who..." and then proceeds to recount a monstrous invasion of privacy or gratuitous bit of ugliness that makes the back teeth itch.

It is as if the writers in this genre, hedging their bets in the unlikely event fandom rises like the followers of Madam DeFarge in the streets of Paris, have prefaced their true feelings with a disclaimer that will save them from the guillotine. Have no fear, friends, the letters will go with me to my grave. Soon after the publication of this essay, most likely.

And here are the stories, so that those who suggest—as did Donald Kingsbury in his communiqué with the words "Each of our Karmas is very different. As L. Ron Hubbard used to say, 'We create what we expect.' Have a happy root canal job"—willfulness on the part of Ellison puts him solely and alone in the path of such vile behavior, will have evidence that this is a plague that touches all of us, sweetheart or monster.

Here are the faces of the demons we deal with:

We'll begin slowly. The first response was from the late "James Tiptree, Jr."—Alice Sheldon—who, because of her government security clearance, maintained pseudonymous anonymity as a matter of serious consequence. Alli wrote me, "Harlan, love...Lovely idea, the egregious fan examples. I've combed memory and nothing comes up. The problem is that for years I was insulated and little happened except the 3-day stakeout of my post office box when the WorldCon was in Baltimore..."

Here's one from James Gunn, professor at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. A very quiet and pleasant man, a *gentle* and *courteous* man. "Dear Harlan, I must not arouse the same passions in fans as some of my colleagues. Oh, I've had people send me books and gummed stickers to sign, and one...wrote me sycophantic letters from a Florida jail and eventually wound up asking me for a thousand dollars for his legal defense...but the only incident that I found myself

marveling at was the young woman who passed me at the ‘meet-the-authors reception’ at the WorldCon in Baltimore, squinted at my name tag, and said indignantly, ‘I never heard of you.’ All I could do was stare.”

Barry Malzberg could do *weeks* of horror stories, angst incarnate. But here’s what he wrote: “Harlan, I think it’s a bad idea altogether, this topic of Great Fan Lunacies Me and My Colleagues Have Known, because this only encourages the troops, stirs them up, like one political disaster has been known to trigger another. The 95% who cannot conceive of being similarly loathesome will laugh and applaud and enjoy and see trivialized real pain, and the other 5% will be taking notes.”

In the process of bringing this manuscript up to date, after five years, it was suggested by one editor that perhaps I should drop the anecdote of the “seven thousand dollar gemstone” as Robert Bloch reported it, because it redounded to Bloch’s benefit. Well, yes, I could have dropped that story; but the intent of this piece is to show the reality, not a carefully manipulated special-pleading slant on that reality. I submit, nonetheless, that anyone crazy enough to send a rock like that, casually, without advising anyone of its value, is a looneytune by any analysis, and might as easily do something dangerous or inconvenient the next time out...or heaven forbid the object of such a person’s admiration should rebuff the attentions! But that wasn’t even what Bob Bloch chose as his most outstanding fan horror story. Here’s what he wrote:

Dear Harlan:

You know the old saying, “Once bitten, twice shy?” Well, I got a new one for you. “Three times bitten; what a dummy!”

A fan I’d known for thirty years kept pestering me to do a collection of my old Lefty Feep stories. Finally he said he’d go into specialty publishing and do the book himself—all I had to do was choose the yarns and write an introduction. My former agent agreed, so I went to work. After a year of unanswered letters I finally caught up with this joker at a convention and pinned him to the wall. “Hey, I forgot to tell you,” he said. “I decided to put out somebody else’s collection instead.”•

A second fan proposed to put out a new collection of my fanzine pieces as a sequel to THE EIGHTH STAGE OF FANDOM. Since he was already heavily into specialty publishing I saw no harm in the idea and, as requested, went over my material, selected the best, and prepared an introduction. Unlike the first yo-yo, this one did reply to my letters, but never took any action. Eighteen months later I finally managed to pry my

material back from him.

The third fan was on the committee of a convention where I was scheduled to be guest of honor—after they found out Jules Verne was dead. This turkey wanted to do a volume of my hitherto-unreprinted stories, both as a convention special and for subsequent sale through a publishing outlet. In this case I needn't wait a year or a year and a half—time was of the essence and he needed my choice of stories plus introductions to same. I rushed the stuff out to him and within two months—right in time for the convention!—he called to tell me he'd changed his mind and there wasn't any book.

I am not releasing the name of the first fan, because he's dead.

And I'm not releasing the names of the other two fans, because I just might kill them yet. (Maybe I won't kill them. Maybe I'll just go after their dicks with a cheese grater.)

I selected dear Alli Sheldon, gentlemanly Jim Gunn, and the ever-fan-helpful Bob Bloch as the first three invokers of the litany, for a reason. I mentioned earlier that Donald Kingsbury's letter suggested we bring such iniquity upon ourselves by having sodden karma. His letter glowed with the wonderful experiences he's had at conventions. Apparently, the only thing dismaying ever to have involved him was this:

"Once I was sitting forlornly at an autograph table all alone because everyone was lined up for Asimov and Ellison, and a sweet young thing who felt sorry for me ran out and bought a book by me, even though she didn't know me from Adam, just so I'd have at least one customer." And then Don finished off the note—as I mentioned earlier—with this: "Each of our Karmas is very different. As L. Ron Hubbard used to say, 'We create what we expect.' Have a happy root canal job."

I expected a bit of that. Because I have chosen to suffer this kind of behavior not at all, mythology has grown that I am rude, meanspirited, brutal and often violent with sweet-faced, innocent fans who merely wish to convey good wishes.

This is probably as valid as an arrant suggestion that Donald Kingsbury is a jealous chucklehead who wouldn't know if he were being insulted or put-upon if the offenders performed their acts using jackhammers and IV drips.

Nonetheless, to remove from the equation any slightest hint of special pleading, of self-defense, or rationalization for a monstrously uncivil Ellison...I have obtained the letters, have seen to an editor's attestation that they're real, and I've opened the parade of the damned

with three writers who have been known for their kindness, civility, leaning toward fan interests, their good upbringing and unblemished courtesy.

So even if one one-millionth of the ugly tales told about your compiler-of-the-facts is true, it has no bearing. Let us simply look at what *other* writers say.

You'll enjoy, particularly, the letters sent by women writers. You think the men have it bad? Listen to Marta Randall:

Dear God, Harlan,

I'm absolutely appalled at this idea you've generated about your Westercon speech. Not that I think it shouldn't be done, and that it's high time, and all that stuff, but I admire the sheer, unadulterated, brazen guts it takes to get up before a room full of fans and tell them about all the terrible things they've done through the years. Visions of stonings and crucifixions, vituperation and much noise, howlings on panels and illiteracy in the pages of fanzines—it's positively delicious. Do it. I won't be there to see it, but I'll be with you in spirit.

Most of the assaults upon me by fans have been verbal. The chubby young woman in Renaissance drag who interrupted me at a party, pushed my companion aside, stared at me, and said: Oh, that's what you look like. I read a book of yours once and I couldn't understand a word in it. The intense fellow who approached me in a hucksters room, asked if he could ask a question, and when I said yes, he said, I've read everything you've ever written, from your first short story on. I really loved that first short story a lot, but the rest of your work stinks. Would you care to comment on why your writing has gone downhill? Two years ago, I was injudicious enough to write a letter to a 'zine responding to someone's typically fug-headed statements about another writer, and received a response telling me that I was obviously a neophyte because this bozo had never heard of me, and if I'd send this guy a copy of my books, he'd be glad to tell me what was wrong with them. The fan who got blotto at a dead-dog party, fell asleep in the con suite at my feet, and spent the next day telling everyone he'd spent the night with me. The Trekkie at the one Star Trek convention I was inveigled into attending, who said of my books, to me, "Well, if they're not about Star Trek, they're full of shit."

It ain't much, thank God, but you're welcome to use it, and my name.

I just had a terrible thought: what if your speech simply gives them more ideas?

Do you begin to see a thread? This is the second time the suggestion has been made. As nervously as many writers sing the praises of their

fans, do you begin to perceive: they're afraid of you, afraid of what you're capable of doing, as lark, as gag, as obsessive self-amusement.

Here's Asimov.

In general, my readers are a very nice bunch of people who virtually never impose...There are the teachers who force all their students to write me painstaking scrawls and make it necessary for me to answer politely because I can't bear to disappoint kids. (I'd like to strangle the teachers, though.)

However, once I blew my top. A bookstore owner asked if I could sign "a few" books for him. I sighed and said okay.

Next thing I got huge packing crates containing every book of mine he had in the store, scores and scores and scores of them. My first impulse was to throw them away and claim they never came. My second was to keep the books for use as gifts (or to a deserving charity). But I couldn't do that. I had to sign them all, reassemble the packing cases, hang them together with ropes and then my wife and I had to stick them on luggage carriers and lug them to the post office which was several blocks away (and I'm not exactly in my first youth any more). The only satisfaction I got was to write the bookstore fellow an eloquent letter that probably singed all the hair off his head and body.

Which is as likely as that the idiot understood he'd made an impertinent fool of himself to begin with. I've told Isaac a hundred times that just because we're both Jewish, does not mean that we must suffer two thousand years' retroactive persecution at the hands of human trash like this bookstore fellow. And did he even *understand* what he'd done, after Isaac apprised him of the monstrous imposition? No, I'd venture not. Because, you see, that's another aspect of this:

Stupid enough to commit the sin in the first place, means...a singularity of tunnel-vision, a self-involvement, a lack of empathy, that blinds them to the awfulness of what they've done...even when you explain it slowly and simply.

For instance, I'm rewriting this essay in my bed, as I went in for fairly serious surgery little more than a week ago. A number of fans found out about this, and so I was pleased, three days before Christmas, by a bookstore owner in the L.A. area, who knows me for years, who called and asked if I'd mind if he came by with a book of mine someone had just bought, for a personal signature. He had spoken to me the day before, and knew I couldn't move out of the bed for fear of the sutures giving way, but he called to ask if I'd mind,

during my recuperation, if I'd sign some goddam book for a customer.

I was astonished and told him I was in bed. He asked a second time. I said, "I'm recuperating! I was three hours under the knife! What the fuck do I care about signing some book for a stranger at this time!?" So he suggested he come by tomorrow, instead. I hung up on him.

Do they understand, Isaac? Not bloody likely!

They feel as if *we're* being rude to *them*.

Barry Longyear wrote one of the most touching of the letters I received in reply to my query. For personal reasons, I'll only reproduce excerpts here...the totality is too intimate.

Early in my career, shortly after the publication of my pun story Duelling Clowns, I was at one of my first conventions (a Boskone, I think). This fan, equipped with the disposition and general build of a gorilla, stops me in the hallway and asks, "Are you Barry Longyear?"

"Yes," I replied, preparing to bask in author's glory.

He hauled off and decked me. "That's for Duelling Clowns," he said; then he stormed out of the hotel...

About a year after completing my treatment for alcoholism and drug addiction at St. Mary's Rehabilitation Center in Minneapolis, I attended my first convention since sobering up. This was the time when my real fan horror took place.

At that time I was still very uncomfortable in drinking situations. Even with a year of A. A. under your belt, early sobriety is a fragile thing. Since MiniCon was being held in St. Paul, about a ten minute drive from St. Mary's Rehab, I figured if I was ever going to be safe at a convention, MiniCon would be the best bet....

The next morning I was up early trying to figure out what one does at a convention at seven AM, never before having had this experience. I was a mite shaky in the self-image department, so I decided to give a fan a thrill and let him eat breakfast with a real-live big time SF pro. This particular fan was on the con staff and had just gotten off duty. In the hotel restaurant we sat down and placed our orders. Every pore on my body was open, waiting to absorb sorely needed compliments. He finished his breakfast, sat back in his booth and smiled at me as he looked up from my name tag. "Well, Barry," he said, "what is it that you do that rates you a guest ribbon?"

As I watched the staved-in hull of my career sinking into oblivion, I focused on my grapefruit and muttered something about doing a little

scribbling now and then.

And they say fan sensitivity is dead.

Terry Carr isn't with us anymore, but here's one he told me, that you might not've heard. When his first novel came out, half of an Ace Double called WARLORD OF KOR, it was around the time of DisCon, 1963. The first wife of a well known fan (who was sitting in the audience as I delivered this essay verbally), came sauntering up to Terry, and Terry was expecting some small recognition from her that his first book had at last been released, and she said to him, "I've just read your novel. I wanted to introduce myself." And Terry smiled, because we all expect kindness our first time out, and she said, "What did you write that miserable piece of shit for?" And she stood, hands on hips, waiting for the pain to translate itself into guilty apology. And Terry said, "I wrote it for seven hundred and fifty dollars," and he walked away.

This one is from Gene Wolfe:

The worst was inviting me to be guest of honor at Icon in Iowa City. Rusty Hevelin was fan guest of honor, and we were told we would give our speeches Friday afternoon.

Then Friday evening.

Then Saturday morning.

Then Saturday afternoon.

Then Saturday evening before the play. At no time were explanations of any of these postponements made.

I arrived at the play at about eight p.m., once more keyed up and ready to speak. First Rusty, then me. Right.

The co-chair got on stage and announced that the guest of honor speeches would be given after the play, and I walked out.

About fifteen minutes later, Rusty found me and asked if I were going to speak after the play. I told him no—he could, if he wished; but I would not. He explained that he intended to refuse, and he'd wanted to suggest we act in concert. Our little meeting ended with our agreeing to strike the convention, which we did. To the best of my knowledge, it was the only time the fan and pro guests of honor (all the GoH the convention had) have staged a concerted labor action.

This was the convention at which the banquet (Saturday evening before the play) was held in the corridors and on the stairways, because the

committee had failed to arrange for a room, tables, and chairs.

Here's a nasty little one from the elegant L. Sprague de Camp.

On the whole fans have treated me very kindly. There was, however, a time a few years ago when a group of admirers of H.P. Lovecraft became so exercised over the critical remarks in my biography of HPL that they discussed hitting me in the face with a cherry pie at a convention.

At the Fantasy Convention in Fort Worth, in 1978, word reached me that someone in this group would undertake this form of literary criticism. A pair of large, muscular fans, who make a hobby of martial arts, appointed themselves bodyguards. When I finished my presentation, a young man, bearing a brown-paper package of about the right size, approached. My defenders asked him what he wanted. Without a word, he turned and went away. So I shall never know for sure what was in that package; but I can bear my ignorance with becoming fortitude.

From Bob and Ginny Heinlein.

Dear Harlan,

Since we retired behind—

[Get this, Folks!]

Since we retired behind an unlisted telephone number and chain link fence and electric gate, we've been pretty free of horror stories. Except one.

One night I was working in my office. There's a pane high up in the door, but it would take a giant to look in through that pane of glass. I can't see anyone shorter than that if I look through the pane.

The bell rang. Startled, because I hadn't let anyone in the gate, I answered the door, and there was a creep. His first words were, "Someone killed my peacock."

I'm afraid that I told him to get out, and that if he didn't, I would call the sheriff.

He didn't climb the fence again, but for days there was some kind of wire "sculpture" left at the mailbox. Each day a new one. And letters. Etc. I never laid eyes on the man again, but I haven't forgotten him....

There were endless drop-ins years ago when we lived in Colorado, and quite a few here until we had the gate installed. Robert once had a phone call—during a cocktail party we were giving. A woman called from Kansas, wanting to know whether she should go to the Menninger Clinic.

And we've had our trees decorated with toilet tissue, and so on. We've even had our lovely house sign stolen.

Here's a quickie. Raymond E. Feist tells one about a fan who showed up at his door a bit before seven AM of a Sunday, while Ray's nursing a fever of 102, after a restless night and he'd finally fallen asleep. So he staggers to the door, looking like hell, and here's this cheery little fan cherub with a paper bag full of books to be signed. Maybe a dozen books. But since Ray had only had a few titles published at that time, what he was looking at was three of each, probably to be sold.

And this kid demands Ray sign the books, right there, right then. And Ray says, "Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I'm sick as a dog, hundred and two fever, I feel like hell." And the kid sorta blinks and doesn't say anything, but he just stands there. So Ray says, "Could you come back another time, this is a little inconvenient," and the kid says, "I'm flying back to Hawaii." And Ray snuffles, and says, "I'm sick...couldn't you maybe..." but the kid just keeps on demonstrating this absolutely *sensitive* demeanor, and keeps wanting the books signed.

"That, and the death threat I got on my answering machine," Ray says, "convinced me to take my number out of the phone book."

Another major writer I contacted for this piece was so nervous about fans giving him trouble, though he called them "creeping morons," that he refused to let me use his name in any way. He said that attending conventions had thrown him so far off his writing that all he wanted to do was absent himself utterly from any access by fans to his life.

I won't yank your chain on this. There *were* some writers who answered my request with letters that said they tended to stay away from fans, stay away from conventions, and so they didn't have any gruesome anecdotes to relate. There were about half a dozen—Marvin Kaye, Algis Budrys, Dean Ing, John Varley, Jack Williamson, David Bischoff—who said they'd had nothing but pleasant relations with their fans through many happy years of association, and they were sorry but they simply had nothing to pass along. Those letters, however, were written in June of 1984, and I've had four of that group of six admit that they had, in fact, suffered a number of wretched experiences—which they recounted with detail and anger—and they simply didn't want to cause any trouble.

But how about Joanna Russ? If there has been a writer more passionate and outspoken about what concerns her in art and in society, who has been more forthcoming about putting those concerns

in her work, I don't know who it might be. Unlike many of the writers I contacted, who were "prudent" about saying anything for fear one of you little psychotic darlings might seek retribution, Joanna was candid; and she wrote:

Yeah. The worst.

Well, besides the folks who send novel manuscripts with instructions to tell them where to send it, (I got three last week) without postage—

I guess the worst was several years ago in Boulder, when I got a letter from what appeared to be a junior high school student, asking me to answer three pages of questions about my "philosophy of life" since her teacher had told the class to do a research paper on a living writer. She also asked for one (1) copy of everything I had written.

I wrote gently back, explaining as tactfully as I could, that no living writer had time to answer three pages of questions about anything, and that I barely had enough copies of my work for myself. I suggested that she buy some of them herself, since I had to pay for them, too, and that she ask her teacher how to do library research, since I suspected that was the sort of thing her teacher had had in mind originally. I then wished her good luck in her career and ended the letter.

Several weeks later I got a letter from her older sister, who threatened to expose me in Ms. and a few other magazines, since my cruel answer had blighted her sister's life and career. Sister (she said) had planned to become—a writer, but after my callous and vicious treatment, said sister only lay on her little bed and cried all day. I had utterly ruined her life. (I am not making this up.)

Or maybe it was the consciousness-raising group that threw me out on the grounds that I was too articulate.

Or the folks who ask for a signed photograph (\$9 to me) sans remuneration and also sans stamps.

The funniest was a fellow who wrote from Walla Walla that he had read The Female Man and just loved my mind. He also loved my photograph on the back and assured me that he was a fun-loving soul who wanted to correspond with me about my philosophy of life (what does that phrase mean?). When I wrote back that I had no time for handsome men of 5'11" with fun-loving souls, or anybody else, I got a second letter which dwelt on my physical charms and sort of lost sight of the book, which I don't think he read (just between you and me and the lamppost).

And the women who write me, complaining about what I let be done (me?!) to covers of paperback books of mine, and refuse to believe that I had nothing to do with it—

Or the friends and colleagues who say, "Why don't you just live off

your writing?" and refuse to believe that I have never gotten more than a \$3,500 advance for a novel, save once—

My favorite horror story, after the sisters business, was an open-mike women's coffeehouse where I read one Saturday night. Two solemn and impressed young women were talking afterward, and I heard one say (of me), "She's so creative." A friend found me bashing my head against a wall in sheer frustrated rage. After a bloody quarter of a century of enslavement to this peculiar obsession, after work, work, work, endless work, to be told, yes, you are so "creative." Pork chops.

Good luck with your speech. It ought to make wonderfully ghastly reading.

Oh, it does make ghastly reading, Joanna.

But you think you've got problems, what with naive readers blaming you for what publishers put on your covers? Well how about when they *pretend* to be naive, merely to cause you grief? What do I mean? Well, here's a classic, fortuitously recent, example of just how malicious fans can be.

In the *Letters* section of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* for December 1989, there appears a communiqué from one Paul Osborn of Bremerton, Washington. (At least, the letter is *signed* as being from someone named Paul Osborn, and the postmark—I'm told—was Bremerton, Washington. But not all is what it appears to be, in the world of science fiction's feral aficionados; as we shall shortly see.)

After dealing with other matters in the previous March 1989 cover-dated issue, the alleged Mr. Osborn writes as follows:

"I liked the Ellison story very much, but why was it listed as a novelette when it was shorter than two of the short stories in the issue?"

Now that's a perfectly reasonable question to ask, and as anyone familiar with Occam's Razor would reply, "It was probably an editorial glitch, a production error that no one caught." Which is *exactly* what it was.

The story in question, "The Few, the Proud," is a mere 3,600 words. It runs seven and a third pages. It is obviously not a novelette. (The universally-accepted designations for story-length are as follows: short story, length under 7500 words; novelette, 7500 to 17,500; novella, 17,500 to 40,000; novel, 40,000 and up.) My preceding appearance in IASFM, in the previous year's mid-December issue, *had* been a novelette: "The Function of Dream Sleep" at 9900 words. So it's conceivable that the Production Director or one of the editorial assistants got them switched around in memory. Whatever.

The point is, even to the slowest intellect going, this is a simple, human error that took place prior to publication; and a transposition so unimportant (appearing as it does only on the table of contents) that it didn't amount to a mote of dust in the course of literary history.

And had the alleged Mr. Osborn stopped there, having asked a reasonable question, it would have been the kind of letter one would expect to receive from a rational reader. But he didn't. Here's what follows, in the same paragraph:

"I suppose a cynic would say that Mr. Ellison, The Guy With Lord Knows How Many Hugo and Nebula Awards (But Always Ready for MORE MORE MORE!!!) is trying to put a fast one over on Duh Hicks from Duh West by calling a short story a novelette. Since there are always fewer novelettes published in a year than there are short stories (in 1988 *Asimov's* published thirty novelettes versus fifty-three short stories), this stratagem gives 'The Few, the Proud' a decided edge. As I said, this is the response of a cynic, and I've given up cynicism for Lent. But by the time the annual index rolls around (and with it, the Readers Award poll—another chance for MORE MORE MORE!!! awards) Lent will be over. I'm looking forward to it."

Heaven knows there is no shortage of paranoia in the world; but even in a Universe of Conspiracy Theories that load of ignorant drivel is laughable. As if I, in Los Angeles, managed somehow to gull the editor—who paid me by the word and knew very well how long the piece was—the managing editor, the editorial assistants, and the contracts manager, all of them three thousand miles away in New York, into letting me suborn them into mislabeling a short story as a novelette for the demented purpose of affording the story a chance to win an award, the designations for which are set by parties unknown to me, *who count the wordage!*

And how did I manage to do this?

Do I have unspeakable secrets that can be used to blackmail these individuals? Did I pay out vast amounts of money to insure a better shot at winning awards that are basically useless to me after thirty-five years at the writing profession? Is there anyone in his or her right mind that could credit any of what the alleged Mr. Osborn suggests as anything more than lunacy?

Even the most naive reader, unfamiliar with the more esoteric aspects of magazine publication, would perceive that this was a straightforward production error of the most common, most inconsequential sort. And one would dismiss the alleged Mr. Osborn's babbling as the ruminations of someone being intentionally silly.

But let's look at what he actually wrote.

As one who *lives* in Duh West, the paralogical reference to Hicks

from Duh West makes no sense at all.

But consider the suggestion that lies passim the convoluted assumptions of the alleged Mr. Osborn's proposal: Ellison has won all these awards, but he's greedy, never has enough awards. But those awards weren't won for the quality of the work, they were somehow managed, coerced, manipulated, all the way back to the first one in 1965, and for the next twenty-five years. By incredibly clever means, Ellison has managed to put it over on the hundreds and hundreds of individuals responsible for awarding the Hugos, Nebulas, Edgars, Bram Stoker, P.E.N., Writers Guild, British Fantasy and World Fantasy Awards this Machiavellian no-talent has accumulated.

Not to mention somehow managing to hypnotize the readers of, say, *Locus*, who have voted for Ellison work over the years, in the number of thousands.

When the letter appeared in *Asimov's*, the magazine should have allowed me the courtesy of replying on the same page to the alleged Mr. Osborn's fever-dream. But not even the managing editor, Sheila Williams, took the letter very seriously. It was clear the author of that delusion was so sophomoric and so off-base, that there wasn't much point in replying. Nonetheless, Ms. Williams wrote a response:

When the Fourth Annual Readers' Award poll does appear, readers will be asked to look at the stories carefully and to only rank them in the category under which they are listed in the Index.

Which is beside the point.

It doesn't address what Mr. Osborn (alleged) was *really* up to.

Because, if it were simply an overly punctilious reader being foolish enough to comment on a glitch as obvious as this even to a neophyte, then why the need for all that glop about MORE MORE MORE!!! (and each time the phrase appears, he puts three exclamation marks)? We are drawn to dismiss the whole thing as, well, ignorant drivel; and I would have done so, too, except years of dealing with this kind of mentality makes my antennae quiver.

And so I got the address of the correspondent from *Asimov's* (there had been no direction by the letter-writer that the address was to have been withheld), and I called information in Bremerton, Washington. And not only is there no Paul Osborn at the address on the letter, there is no "Paul Osborn" listed in Bremerton at all. And a simple check of public records in Bremerton advises that the parties listed as living at the address the alleged Mr. Osborn gave as his own, do not seem to go by the name Osborn.

So who is this letter-writer, who cobbles up gratuitously insulting codswallop? From the evidence of the letter, it is a regular reader of science fiction...what we call a fan.

And it is one who thinks himself (or herself) devilishly clever, to go into left field to spread just another tidy slather of ugly supposition on a loaf already redolent with myth and bullshit. What kind of mentality is so meanspirited?

How many other writers have suffered this kind of odious letterhacking opprobrium through the years? And how many work-hours have been lost in trying to rectify the lousy impressions made by these people? Enough hours to write enough books to fill a large showcase. Books no one will ever read.

What toll does it take? Here's a small part of a four-page, single-spaced letter in response to my original query. It is from David Gerrold:

"The thing is, Harlan—I made a mistake. I thought that fans were important. If I'd never been introduced to fandom, I'd have saved five years of mistakes. Indeed, I credit my relationship with the more hostile elements of the fannish community with being partially responsible for a five year slump in my writing." David then goes on to relate anecdote after anecdote—one deranged woman who convinced a group of fans at a convention that she was carrying David's baby—a fan who sent him a greeting card that was personally inscribed, *Merry Christmas to Everybody. Except you.*—a fan who solicited contributions supposedly intended for the benefit of another fan who had been robbed—who didn't even exist—and he ends his letter as follows:

Curiously, there was a time when I thought the core of fandom was basically good people; it was only the fringes who were dangerous.... I'm not willing to believe that any more. I'm not willing to be as accessible to fandom as I used to be. To do that would be to subject the writer inside to the kind of shitstorms that produced the slump in the first place.... Since I left the fans behind, I have become the writer I want to be.

Not just to writers comes this unwanted attention. Ask any one of a dozen artists whose names have appeared on Hugo ballots the past ten years how they respond to their paintings being stolen from the art show exhibition rooms, no matter how tough and wary the Security Guards; ask them how swell they feel when the fat fan scrutinizes the minimum bid on a painting and turns to the creator to snarl, "Who the

hell d'ya think you are, Frank Frazetta?" ask them how their hearts sank when they got back the unsold artwork after the convention and found one of the oils had been slashed, how they felt that there were footprints on the black-and-white sketches.

But don't ask Tim Kirk about conventions, because his face is a mask of sorrow. He hasn't been to a convention in more than nine years and, if he's lucky, he won't have to attend another one. He's more than disenchanted. He's forlorn about what fandom appears to be in his eyes these days. He won't use the word pathetic, he prefers bathetic. But he knows that whatever pinnacles of artistic achievement he has scaled, or yet will scale, it has been in spite of fans and their "support." Because all they ever required of him was that he draw cute and harmless five-finger exercises. (By the thousands, for fanzines, who never paid him a dime.) Tim doesn't berate fans, or put them down, or rail against them. He doesn't say what I'm saying here in public. He knows better, as do so many other artists and writers—who seem to fear this loving cadre of vampire fans—not to stir the pot.

But if you catch him late in the evening, when he's other than his usual quiet, charming self, he'll make it clear that the worst thing fans did to him was deny him the challenge of being as complete an artist as he wanted to be. Perhaps it's not their fault—they like what they like, and they want more and more of it, without change, without growth, without experimentation—but if an artist has a responsibility to his craft, then it doesn't seem uncommon to expect the audience that also demands the artist's attention to show some sort of responsibility to the artist.

From Gregory Benford:

The oddest incident I recall is a fellow who sent along the predictable idea for a novel, with the usual deal: you write it, split the money with me. When I sent it back, unread, he replied with a warning—not that I shouldn't use the idea myself in fiction, but rather, a demand that he'd better not see me publishing research on this idea in the scientific literature!

He honestly thought his notion was Deep Stuff, and I, the sinister scientist, would ache to enhance my skinny publication list with a milestone paper on the wonderful whatsit.

Ah well.

Ah well, indeed. The heartfelt sigh, the resigned shake of the head, and the dismaying certainty that the variety of these individual

lunacies is uncountable. If they don't get us with the compendium of horrors already explicated, they do it like this...

From Spider Robinson:

Total stranger calls up from "somewhere in California" at 2 a.m. Says he's been thinking hard about suicide, and wants to know, is there really a Callahan's Place, and if so how do I get there, I have to know, tonight. Five minutes after the conversation ended, of course, I figured out just how I should have played it: told him yes, The Place is real, given him a set of bogus directions to anywhere on Long Island, and hoped that on his way across the continent he ran into something that cheered him up. But I am not a trained crisis-call jockey or suicide counselor; what I did on the spur of the moment was what any jerk would have done. You make your own Callahan's Place wherever you go, always darkest before the dawn, a year from now you'll look back on this and laugh, why don't you tell me a little about what's bugging you and maybe we can find a way out together...

He hung up abruptly.

My firm belief is that he either died or tried to, very hard, within the ensuing fifteen minutes. I'll never know. I don't even have a first name for him. I went through changes the next few weeks. What I came away with was anger. Because I once entertained that guy for an idle hour, he repaid me by dropping his entire karma, too heavy for him to heft, onto my lap, while making sure I'd have no place to put it.

Big surprise, Spider. That's standard operating procedure for this kind of emotional vampire. I wish I had a quarter for every "suicide" who has called me...and always at an indecent, inconvenient hour. And they never tell you who they are, they only want to whimper and moan about their unfortunate state of existence. The first hundred or so times it happened to me, I got all puffed up with human compassion and a sense of responsibility, and tried to talk them down.

Perhaps it helped, maybe it didn't. Who's ever to know? Because these wee hours parasites haven't the common decency ever to let you know, later, that you were of any value. They just flap in, unload their shit, make you feel awful, and then cut off. These days I have a very different manner with such intruders on my privacy.

But that was only the beginning of Spider's letter. He had a second story about another looneytune who appeared at his door. And then he offered *this* charming (and absolutely emblematic) delineation of the Fan Mentality at full flower, the stone fan being itself in *excelsis*:

Jeanne and I are at a con; some fans announce they're taking us to dinner. Great, we're broke, and we're starving. So we drive, and we drive, and we drive. An hour, and Jeanne, as even-tempered a woman as ever lived, is threatening mutiny if we don't arrive soon. I should have guessed, from the way the driver kept giggling. An hour and a quarter after we had eyes to eat, the three-car caravan of fans pulls up in front of a roadside beanery called, you guessed it, Callahan's. The food was awful, the prices were horrendous, the service slovenly, and when the check came we learned for the first time that no one had figured on paying for our dinner. I mean, we're all fans together, right?

We did not pay for our dinner—we couldn't! We were broke and living off editorial charity for the weekend. But it was an unpleasant moment, complicated by the infuriating awareness that they had done all this to show us how much they loved us...

And he went on to deliver up a few more pain in the ass stories, ending his letter like this:

Hope all this is of help to you. Frankly, I don't hold out much hope that anything can smarten the little darlings up.

The list of authors and artists who have been stiffed with bounced checks for their services at fan-engineered conventions and media "spectaculars" is as endless, as well-tenanted as is the list of writers and artists who have had fans mooch meals, lodging and loans from them. Whether such productions have been conferences cobbled together by hubris-surfeited fans at colleges they attended (who rigged the gig just so they could meet "their favorite author"), or at hotels in large cities, whether as *Star Trek* conclaves or as comic book/movie-tv/science fiction gatherings. Writers as prominent as Sturgeon, Herbert, Asimov, Clarke, Niven, Simak, Bova, Moorcock and Sheckley (to name just the few whose unprofitable experiences come quickly to mind) have found themselves lured at one time or another to some speaking engagement or convention that was nothing more than a demented wish-fulfillment in the litter-filled head of an adolescent fan, have found themselves having lost actual speaking gigs or trips because they thought they were committed for a job that never materialized, have found themselves at one time or another holding bad paper laid on them by a sweet-faced fan.

Joe Haldeman wrote:

One recurrent problem is that I write hard-science sf but am no scientist, and so occasionally screw up. There are legions of weirdos out there who read with a calculator in one scabrous paw.... There have been a couple of potentially dangerous crazies. I got a scrawled note after The Forever War came out, congratulating me for "giving it to the Jews." All I can figure out is that one of the first people to die in the book is named Rabi, a Muslim name. But that guy probably sees Hitler's face in his Rice Krispies.... One strange time a drunkish fan followed me around a convention rather late at night, trying to talk me into playing poker. I finally acquiesced, and three or four of us went up to his room, where he produced fancy chips and cards. At that time I showed him that I only had two dollars' cash on me, two antes. He was outraged and actually pulled a knife. I took it away from him easily enough...but it was one of those experiences that's more scary in retrospect than it is when it happens.

I mean, Charlie Manson was a science fiction fan. I'm not so worried about the crazy letters and the occasional fan who starts sputtering at you in public. I'm worried about the quiet guy with a hair up his ass and a pistol in his pocket. Face it, Harlan; we get up on enough stages and sooner or later that guy is going to be in the audience. Let's hope he can't shoot straight.

He was in one of my audiences, Joe. He shot straight enough. Remind me to tell you that story some time.

That's one of the stories I *can* tell. There are many more anecdotes and horrors I've been asked *not* to pass along. There are stories I've been told "off the record," in strictest confidence, *sotto voce* and *sub rosa*, stories whose tellers could not stop themselves from imparting the fine news, but who, as they completed their tale of woe, suddenly realized this would see print. And they asked that their names be withheld. These are stories I cannot verify...from sources who insist on remaining unnamed....

Such as the very famous older writer, a golden age star name, who took a fan in to stay at his home, who only asked the fan to baby-sit when the writer and his wife had to go out, who didn't discover till weeks after the fan had left, that his "guest" had sodomized the writer's eleven-year-old granddaughter.

Such as the fantasy author who had written a strongly sexual novel, who was spat upon at a convention.

Such as the elderly writer who was forced to move from her apartment to escape the attentions of three fans who would not stop calling her, writing her, and coming to her house unannounced.

And more, and more, and more. But this becomes only the heaping

on of redundancies. To what end? To the end of buttressing the reality of what writers suffer with many of their “loving fans” so solidly that not even the smallest rathole of rationalization—such as the “Well, Ellison is such a visible target, he deserves what he gets” *non sequitur*—is left to the guilt-ridden apologists who will bristle and rage at this essay.

After I had delivered this material at Westercon 37 in Portland, in 1984, I received a great many letters from pros and fans, horrified by the extent of this problem.

How about this, from Simon Hawke:

Not long ago, my agent was trying to sell something of mine to an editor who shall go nameless. (And I will not divulge the name, don't ask.) Keep in mind, this is an editor I've never met or spoken to, but one who knows that Simon Hawke used to write under another name. (I am a very different person now in many ways. Older, wiser, calmer and more philosophical about life's various disappointments.) This editor took one look at the proposal, at my name on it, and—I have on very good authority from someone who was in the office—rejected it without even bothering to read it. Apparently, this editor was once on a train, en route to a convention in Boston, and recalled a group of female fans, sitting at the other end of the car and talking loudly enough that she could hear them, discussing my “sexual excesses,” rather like a group of high school girls comparing notes, apparently in so detailed and graphic a manner that she was so put off, she remembered it years later and it influenced her opinion of me. I was not someone she wanted to do business with. And the reason I know this is that she mentioned the incident in the office, where my acquaintance overheard.

Now, at the risk of seeming overly self-effacing, while I have, in the past, occasionally gone to bed with someone I met at a convention, I am not Warren Beatty, nor am I De Sade, and I am not exactly John Holmes. In short, I am an average lover at best, I like to think considerate, affectionate, and giving, but by no stretch of the imagination am I a sexual athlete. Not to put too fine a point on it, I don't know who those women were, and while it's certainly possible I may have met one or more of them, perhaps even been intimate with one of them, though I cringe at the thought, I certainly did not do anything so out of the ordinary that it would excite any comment. Certainly nothing that would disgust anyone. And yet, though this incident does not begin to approach the sort of awful things you spoke of, it tarnished my reputation in that editor's eyes and it cost me a sale.

Like many people, I used to think that you attracted that sort of thing,

unintentionally, by virtue of your highly visible profile and your aggressive, up-close-and-personal demeanor. I was wrong, as you so demonstrably proved by citing those who gave your letter a serious response. I had dropped out of sight, not going to cons or even speaking to editors, letting my agent handle all my business, anxious to put to rest, once and for all, the sort of gossip that had been floating over my head like a Sword of Damocles.

Mildred Downey Broxon wrote, in part, “That was a zinger of a speech at Westercon, and was the sole topic of conversation for many hours afterward, at least among the shaken and drained group in which I found myself.

“Your inclusion of ‘testimonials’ from other sufferers added verisimilitude. It could, after all, be argued that your high visibility and assertive personality make you a natural target; but the evidence of other, widely-assorted victims was damning.”

She said something even more interesting, and I’ll get to that in a moment; but the authentication of what I’ve set down here, by the testimonial of the editor, parallels my actually displaying the letters at that Guest of Honor banquet. *This* time I didn’t want the alleged Mr. Osborns of fandom to have a free shot at invalidating the message, muddying the water, diverting the focus...by calumny heaped on the messenger. Even if I cop to all the ugliness rumor and gossip lay at my door, even if I am as beastly as the fan mill suggests, how do the apologists explain all the rest of this litany?

As Malzberg said, the ninety-five percent of you out there who are decent, sane, rational and courteous, those of you horrified at these revelations, will not know what to make of it all, because you don’t act that way and you won’t be able to fathom how others *can* act that way and think they’re cute or anything less than loathsome. But the five percent—a few of whom will no doubt appear in the letters column in a forthcoming issue to explain just why writers *do* deserve to be treated like shit, how we would be nowhere if it weren’t for their valiant support of our careers by expenditure of their hard-earned pennies, how we have no right complaining and should be slavishly grateful for even vicious notice—that five percent will continue in its brutish ways.

And after I delivered the material you’ve just read (which has been augmented by additional contributions from writers whose replies reached me after the Westercon, or who were solicited recently for a few updatings), here’s how I ended my Guest of Honor speech:

(I said:) “I’ve saved the best for last. Of all the things that have

been done to me—and I have only scratched the surface here—and of all the things that have been done to other writers and artists, the prizewinning monstrosity, the anecdote that I think will put the last nail in the testament, comes from Alan Dean Foster.

“I’ve saved it for last, because not even the most vicious detractor can find a bad word to say about Alan Dean Foster. He is as decent and courteous a man as one can hope to meet.

“You ain’t gonna believe *this* one:”

Dear Harlan,

In re yours of the 5th. I have only one incident that might suit your purposes and I still haven’t quite figured it out. I was heading back to my hotel room in the company of one of the con staff, after delivering the guest of honor speech at the past Okon, when someone yelled, “Alan Foster?” and I turned around and they hit me in the face with a paper cup full of warm vomit.

To this day what puzzles me is not the attack itself, which one comes to expect after a while, but the type of mind that not only could conceive of such a thing but actually find amusement in the preservation of its own vomit for purposes of using it to assault another person. Someone had to throw up carefully into a cup and then carry it around with them while in the process of searching me out. To me, that’s infinitely sicker than actually throwing the stuff.

Oh, gentle reader, you should have seen that banquet hall as I read from Alan’s letter. The room was packed—if I recall correctly, something in the range of fifteen or sixteen hundred attendees at that Westercon—and delivering this talk took an hour and a half. As time went by, and name after name came before them, as incident of awfulness followed incident upon anecdote, the room fell silent...the timorous, nervous laughter that had accompanied the telling of the first few stories, even that had ceased. At one table a woman was crying, her head laid down across her arms on the tabletop. At another table a man kept striking the padded seat of his chair, over and over, hardly seeming to know he was doing it. A woman was in the rear, moaning stop it, stop it, please stop it. A man standing against a wall had his eyes closed, swaying, rocking, back and forth. And from everywhere in that large ballroom, when I read Alan’s letter, came the gasps of disbelief. At last, at final measure, *now* they couldn’t deny the underlying message of the speech. All had been preamble. Now they were drained, horrified to their shoetops, stony-eyed and pale, a great room filled with decent human beings who had to admit,

at last, that their ranks contained a few of those who are unforgivable.

I had just turned fifty years old. Little more than a month earlier. And one of the fan dealers had taken note of that fact, and had produced an item to sell at this Westercon whereat I was Guest of Honor. And so this is how I finished my lecture:

“And where does it all come to mean something, to have a purpose, this dreadful litany of rudeness and impositions? What is the point? Well, it comes to a fan/dealer having the notion that printing up T-shirts that say, oh so cleverly, 50 SHORT YEARS OF HARLAN ELLISON, to be sold at a convention where this Harlan Ellison is the Guest of Honor, without even suggesting that the man whose name he’s selling for five dollars a shot might be entitled to a royalty, much less be entitled to a moment’s thought that the T-shirt might be insulting, is acceptable behavior.

“But no one makes those considerations, and dozens of such T-shirts are sold, and worn, as I can see from here that many of you have decked yourselves out in precisely that item of finery, and you come up to me, and you stand right in front of this alleged “Guest of Honor” and you ask for an autograph, or you ask a question, or you make a comment, wearing clothing that mocks my height (a fact of nature over which I have no control, as opposed to your bad manners, which are entirely of your own making), and not one of you thinks the subject of the T-shirt might be hurt by such an insensitive act. One *must* assume none of you gave it a consideration, because the alternative is the contemplation of someone who throws warm vomit.

“And the subject of the T-shirt’s logo only smiles as he signs your autograph, appearing properly slavishly grateful for your attention, and the fifty-year-old man says nothing.

“But like George Alec Effinger and Stephen King and Barry Malzberg and David Gerrold and Tim Kirk and many, many others who asked that their names not be mentioned...the short fifty-year-old man will resist more and more ever going among such people.

“Because they are not kind. And one need not put up with unkindness from those who pretend to be all of the same family of noble dreamers, not when there are so many total strangers in the world who will be beastly without reason.

“Children of our dreams, so many of you have said. Oh, how I was moved by what you wrote; oh, how you turned my life around; oh, how much this or that story meant to me when I was lonely and desperate. Children of our dreams.

“Xenogenesis.

“The children do not resemble the parents.

“And many of you wonder why so many of those literary parents

think positively of the concept that birth control might be made retroactive.”

That was the end of it, or at least it should have been. But reality continues to challenge our best fantasies for the title of Most Unbelievable.

In the weeks that followed the speech, as I said, I received a lot of mail about the presentation. All of it was of this sort, represented by an extract from a letter by a young man named Anthony Pryor, then living in Portland:

Your speech at the banquet moved me greatly. I knew that some insane fans occasionally did unpleasant things to authors; but this... unthinkable!...And so, to show you that your anger, and the words with which you expressed that anger, did not fall on deaf ears, I want you to know that I, as well as many friends to whom I have spoken, will endeavor—if we are aware of it and have the means of dealing with it—to prevent such things as you discussed in your speech from happening. We may never get the chance. The psychotics will continue to insult, injure and anger authors despite our feeble efforts to stop them, but if we can prevent such things from happening just once, it will have been worthwhile.

Which would lead one to believe that, yes, if one makes a case as strong as this, and delivers it with passion and conviction, that it will touch the soul of even the basest listener. Right. And pigs'll fly.

Here is a verbatim extract from the Westercon 37 daily update circulated at that event. It is dated Monday, July 2nd. It was distributed throughout the convention the morning after my presentation.

RUMOR CONTROL: At roughly 4:15 A.M. several fire alarms were activated in the hotel and some floors were evacuated temporarily. To the best of our knowledge, this is what happened:

A smoke detector was pulled out of the ceiling in the hallway on the 12th floor. This caused an alarm to go off.

A fire alarm was pulled on floor 10.

Activation of the fire alarms caused certain safety mechanisms to automatically engage in the hotel. Fire doors closed. An emergency ventilation system switched on.

One blower stuck. Salon F began to fill with smoke from a smoldering fanbelt on the stuck blower.

Although there was smoke, apparently there was no fire.

We don't know who broke the smoke detector or who pulled the alarm.

All parties were closed down. We appreciate everyone's calmness and cooperation.

UPDATE 7:30 AM: At a meeting with Marriott management the significance of false alarms was stressed. The possibility of injury or death is great in any emergency evacuation.

BECAUSE OF LAST NIGHT'S FALSE ALARM, WE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO ALLOW ANY ROOM PARTIES TONIGHT. IF WE CAN LOCATE THE INDIVIDUAL(S) RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ALARM, WE MAY (REPEAT: MAY) BE ABLE TO RE-NEGOTIATE THIS WITH THE HOTEL.

If we can't have room parties, we will have a large party in Salon E. This will mean HOTEL LIQUOR ONLY in this space.

Hospitality Suite will be open in the Presidential Suite until 6 pm, non-alcohol. At 6 pm Hospitality will move to Ballroom level to accommodate the general dance and party Monday evening. This is in conformance with the "NO PARTIES" agreement we negotiated with the hotel.

The Convention Committee sincerely regrets this major inconvenience. These pranks are a danger to everyone.

And in her letter received by me the week after the convention, Mildred Downey Broxon went on to say, "Scuttlebutt has it that you were feeling as if the idiot who set off the fire alarm might have been influenced by your speech. I tend to doubt that. Such a person probably didn't even *listen* to your speech and, if he heard it, failed to understand what you were saying. It is highly likely that one of these subhumans was to blame.

"However, the incident following so closely on your speech may have caused those few who thought the matter exaggerated to take notice. Nothing like being roused out at 4 AM, after all, to make one think. Long and bitterly."

And so, nature imitates nature, sans the art.

There could have been more, much more, to this essay. I have at hand a long series of lamentations by Joe Straczynski on the *new* venue for fan abuse...Computer Bulletin Board Systems; and a late reply from Jean M. Auel detailing a demand for money "anywhere from \$20 to \$8000" by a fan; and a ghastly incident that happened to Joe L. Hensley...

But you get the idea.

And those of you in the sane, courteous ninety-five per cent...well, perhaps this concentrated jolt of nastiness will alert you to the other five per cent who roam and foam among us. The alleged Paul Osborns

of the world. Those who come slouching to the party given by the noble dreamers with that little paper cup hidden behind their back.

Warm vomit. Xenogenesis. Have a nice day.

ROCK GOD

Moist shadow men sang there. A strange song of dark colors. "*Ah-wegh thogha!*" Two pure white bulls were brought, and ritual purification was achieved by cutting their throats. Then the white goat, whose blood was sipped from its severed, dripping heart. Then the immense manlike figures of tree limbs and branches were set on fire, the bound human sacrifices in their depths shrieking as they burned. Then the moist shadow men, whom history would call the last Bronze Age people, the Wessex People, drew their animal-hide cloaks about them, cloaks of an animal that existed only in dreams, and they moved within the circle of standing Cyclopean stones and lintels. Moved within the dark circle of Stonehenge, and swayed back and forth, murmuring their prayers.

Naked, cold, so cold in the winter wind, the great priest stood on the altar stone, and dropped his arms, and let his head droop forward, and invoked the loftiest, the lowliest prayer. To Dis.

On the slaughter stone, the head of the virgin was turned toward the altar, and her shadowed eyes seemed suddenly afire with love of something unnameable. The lesser priests held their ritual knives ready.

Away on the altar stone the great priest called Dis. Begged *him* to come. And there was sound in the earth. And there was sound in the stones. In the great stones. And there was sound in the rocks.

And the priests kneeled to the girl who smiled and whose moist mouth silently begged for climax, and they did things to her, and then carried the meat to the altar stone, laying it at the feet of the great priest. While the worshippers swayed and invoked their god.

Darkness flowed as the sounds of great heavings in the rocks grew louder. Then Dis came. Great, dark Dis came.

They stared through the massive archway toward the heel stone. The first faint glimmer of sunrise splashed its polished dome with the unclean water of the blood sea. And the heel stone began to change.

Dis came from the earth that was his flesh. The rock that was his bone. The stone that was his home that was his essence.

The sunrise ceased. Night came again. Washing up out of the earth, darkness flowed and roiled and the world went dark as Dis came from the rock.

The heel stone shifted shape and grew, and rising from the inanimate stone Dis took form. Hairless flesh as solid as mountains. The great corded legs ran like lava, flowing toward the sinister circle of Stonehenge. Flowed, and touched archway, trilithons, sarsen stone, slaughter stone, lintels, bluestone horseshoe...and they fed the body of Dis with their substance, and he grew. Massive, enormous, rising into the night that oozed up from the earth, as darkness covered the world. Greater than the stones, taller than the huge branch-figures wherein still smoldered the human sacrifices. Two hundred, three hundred feet, towering over the awed and supplicating Wessex People.

Dis, rock god, had come again as he had come one hundred years before, and one hundred years before that.

Words brought him. Needs brought him. Fear of *not* bringing him forth from his own body, the earth, had brought him. Belief had brought him. Now, again, as it had brought him once every century, to the low-fallen ones who worshipped him: not because he promised life after death, not because he promised salvation, not because he promised rich harvests and plentiful rain. Dis was not a God of promise. He was called forth because he would come, called or not. Because he was Dis, and his body was the very ground they walked, and they could do no other. Because it was necessary for him to stride the world once every century. There was no human explanation for his need...he was Dis...it was reason enough.

More. Darkness seeped up into the skies. The world was dark. He rose, greater and greater still. Stonehenge vanished to become his legs, his torso, his arms, the terrifying shape of his head. Stonehenge fed his bulk and he loomed over them.

A cry of hopelessness, low and animal, came from the Wessex People. From the throat of the great priest and his assistants, and from the throat of the acolyte priest whose name was not yet recorded.

The great priest murmured his words, incantations he had been taught would keep Dis from harming those who worshipped him. There was no way for him to know: they had no effect, they were no protection. Dis had never *desired* their destruction, so they had been spared. Yet they believed. Helpless, yet they believed. And...

This rising was not like the others that had occurred in the thousand centuries since Dis had miraculously appeared.

The great priest sensed it first; then the acolyte. The others were frozen, uncomprehending, waiting.

The great horned head of Dis turned; the rock god peered through the eternal darkness that flowed upward from the Earth, as if seeing the stars that were now hidden from all but his sight.

Then the face turned down and for the first time Dis spoke to men.

I will sleep.

They listened. Fear greater than the fear they had always known at Dis's coming choked them. They had thought in their dim way there was no greater fear, but now Dis spoke. The sound of volcanos. The sound of winds. Caverns. Pain. Vapor exploding through stone.

I will sleep and dream.

I will be safe.

I will give you a thing.

Possess it.

The holiest of holies.

I sleep within.

And Dis reached into his body, thrust his taloned hand as big as the biggest trilothon into his body of rock that was flesh, and brought forth a mote of burning blackness. He held it up to his flaming eyes. Vistas of the underworld leaped and scintillated in the fire-pits of his eyes. The black light of the mote met the flames of his eyes and the light melted and merged and leapt and the fire entered the mote, and crimson became blackness and blackness became crimson, and all was within the mote, and it pulsed, pulsed, waned, subsided, lay quiescent.

Then Dis bent and lowered his hand, laying the mote at the feet of the great priest.

Keep safe my soul.

I will come again one day.

Unending pain if my soul is lost.

This is my command.

The great priest feared to look up, but his words were to his god, to assure him the life of all his people would be spent protecting the holiest of holies.

But suddenly there was a bold sound from the throng of petrified worshippers, and the great priest had a moment's presaging of terror as the young acolyte priest—who could not wait for succession, who lusted after power now—broke from the mass of dark praying shapes, raced across the open space and leaped onto the altar stone.

“No!” the great priest moaned.

“Great Dis!” the acolyte priest shouted, looking up into the face that his race's memory would never be able to describe without a shudder. “Great Dis, we have served you for centuries! Now we ask a

boon! I, Mag, demand for your faithful ones who pledge to protect your sleeping soul, the boon of—”

None ever knew what token the acolyte might have demanded to raise himself to a position of power. The rock god reached down and darkness flowed from his taloned fingers. Black fire consumed the acolyte in an instant, and the pillar of black fire sparkled upward, thinned, became a lance-line no man could look into. Then Dis hurled the black fire into the ground, where it burned through and could be seen to shimmer. The sound of Mag’s soul shriveling was a trembling, terrible thing.

Then Dis flowed back into the earth, the rocks became rocks once more, Stonehenge solidified, and all that remained was the power stone, the black mote stone, at the feet of the great priest, whose body shivered and spasmed from the nearness of the god’s vengeance.

And when Dis was gone, to sleep his sleep of ages, the Wessex Folk saw there was a new rock in the Stonehenge circle. In its surface was imprinted the memory of a face that had belonged to one they’d known, contorted in agony beyond their ability to describe. But they would never forget: Mag, in the stone, striation lines of anguish, forever he would live in pain, dead inside the rock, forever blackly burning in agony, with his unvoiced demand.

They took the mote and kept it holiest of holies, and Dis slept.

Dis, most cunning, had separated himself seven times and one more. To let his flesh sleep with his soul was to permit the chance of destruction. His soul slept within the black mote of Stonehenge. But his flesh he cut seven ways, and there were seven risings, all on the same night. From the mystic number seven, from the seven unearthly risings had come seven stones to match the mote. They came to be known as the Seven Stones of Power. They were known to the world, for Dis knew a god exists only if there are believers; and as he must sleep, for reasons known only to gods, he must leave behind a legacy for legend, by which he would be remembered, against the time he would rise once more.

The Seven Stones of Power:

In Ireland, the Blarney Stone.

The Stone of Scone that came from Scotland and now lived beneath the Coronation Chair in Westminster Abbey.

Hajar al-Aswad, the Black Stone, the great religious symbol of Islam; kept sacred and safe in the Ka’bah sanctuary, the Sacred Mosque in Mecca.

The Koh-i-noor diamond, which the Persians called the Mountain of Light.

The lost Stone of Solomon that had vanished from Palestine and which was said to be the most treasured possession of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa.

The Welsh Stone of Change—which some called merely the Plinth, for time and legends shimmer in the memory of the frightened—that had last been known to reside at the vacant seat of Arthur's Round Table, the Siege Perilous, the seat and Stone that could only be claimed by the predestined finder of the Holy Grail.

And the Amida of Diabutsu, the Great Buddha, in the Sacred Temple of Kyobe in Japan—that was.

These seven. And the soul mote.

Legend and the ways of men kept these potent stones secreted. Yet there were chips, and bits, and from *them* came the Great Seal of Solomon, the silver crescent of the Great Anthrex, the Talisman of Suleiman the Magnificent, and the Circle of Isis. But they counted for little, despite their immense power.

It was the seven stones, and the soul mote in which the essence of Dis dreamed his sinister dreams (of worlds where great lizards carried on commerce, where living light in the skies ruled creatures of flesh, where the gods drew breath that cleft the earth to its molten core) in which *true* power resided: sleeping.

The soul mote was buried at Stonehenge, and time passed till even the Wessex People were gone, and their having passed that way was forgotten.

This is what happened to the black soul mote.

It was dug up by one who came in the night and was mad. And so, mad, he was not afraid. But his madness did not deter the terrible death that came to him, the flesh stripped from his body and eaten by things only partially human. But he had already traded the mote to one of Minoan Crete. That one passed it for great wealth to a thinker of Mycenaean Greece from whom it was taken in ransom by a priest of Isis. The Egyptian lost it to a Phoenician and he, in turn, lost it in a game of chance that took all he owned, as well as his life...

From hand to hand it traveled, down through the centuries, with death and shapes in the night following its journey.

A thousand hands, a thousand men of cultures shrouded in antiquity. Till it found its way from an ocean floor to the hand of an adventurer who also worked in silver. He cleaned it and polished it and mounted it. Then women owned it.

And each woman became famous. The names are legend. But always they coveted more, and finally reaped their rewards in blood. The soul mote came across another ocean, where it went from the treasure hordes of Osmanski Cossacks to the coffers of Polish

noblewomen, from the dowries of Parisian *demimondaines* to the chamois gold-sacks of English vicars, from the pockets of cutpurses to the New World.

And there it passed from brooch to pendant, ring to lavalier...and was lost.

...and was found:

by a Croatian workman who had no idea what it was, and threw it with a spadeful of refuse, into the hollow center of the cornerstone of a great skyscraper. And the building rose one hundred and fifteen storeys over the sleeping soul of the great rock god Dis. Who knew the time was approaching.

Night hung crucified outside the ninety-fifth floor window of Stierman's office. The night and the men in the room seemed as one. They both accused Stierman. His mouth was dry. He knew at least two of these seven were with the Organization. But which two were deathmen of that "business firm" and which were merely angry entrepreneurs, he did not know. But all seven had partnered him in the construction of the Stierman building. And any one of the seven could ruin him.

"We were all served today," one of them said. He slapped the Grand Jury subpoena onto Stierman's desk.

"You'll pay for this." It was the one with the reptilian eyes. He was frightening. Stierman could not speak.

"How much did you skim, Stierman? How much?"

That was number three.

The other four all spoke at once. "Do you have any idea what happens if this building falls?" "We're all in this together, but it's *you*, Stierman, it's *you*!" "Swiss account, Stierman? Is that where you put it?" "I oughta kill you, you scum!"

The building in which they sat was sinking. The foundations had been filled with garbage, with substandard materials; the ground itself had been soft. The building was vanishing into the ground. Nothing strange about it, nothing magical, merely inadequate building procedures. Frank Stierman had pocketed almost four point six million dollars from the construction costs of the building, and it had shown up in the final product.

The second floor was now below street level. Access to the Stierman Building was obtained by entrance through a hastily-cut door in the side of a second-floor office. From the foyer and the basements, one had to take an elevator upstairs to get out at the ground floor. The tenants had all vacated. The corporations and

professional men had fled. Stierman's seven partners were on the verge of ruin, and the insurance companies had already laughed in their faces.

"Speak up, you sonofabitch!"

Stierman knew his only chance to survive this meeting was to bluff: naked, survival bluff.

At least till he could get out of the country. Brazil. Then Switzerland. Then...anywhere.

"My God, you men have known me fifteen years—have you ever known me to do a dishonest thing? What the hell's wrong with you?" Charm. Trust. Frank Stierman.

He's had an amazing career. Came out of nowhere. One of the biggest developers in Manhattan. Zeckendorf looks like a kid making sand castles next to Stierman. Trust him all the way. Helluva guy. Charming.

Sand in the cement. Quite a lot of sand.

Specifications cut close to the line. Quite close.

Very silken attorneys.

A little juice to the surveyors.

A little juice to the building commission.

A little juice to the Councilmen.

Oversubsidized. Oversold. Overworked.

Trust and charm. Frank Stierman.

It was working. The wide blue eyes. The strong chin. The cavalry-scout ruggedness. It was working. *Which two are patched into the Organization?* Work, mouth, work this man out of the East River where fish eat garbage.

"Okay, so we've got a situation here. We've got a contingency we never expected. The ground is settling. Okay, we're losing the building. Maybe.

"And..." he paused, significantly, "maybe not!"

They listened. He dredged lies from the silt of his mind. "I had half a dozen structural engineers in here today, land assayers, environmental impact guys, geologists, men who know what to do with this kind of situation. Now I'm not going to tell you that we're out of the woods...Jesus, we've got some rough sledding ahead of us. But we know there was faulty workmanship in the construction, we know the damned contractors who sank the pylons shorted us on the quality of the fill...we know we're going to have some losses...but we're *friends!* That counts for a lot. We're going to have to—"

Dis stirred.

Frank Stierman, naked save for loincloth, found his back against a rock wall, found a bronze blade in his right hand, found himself

staring across what had been the conference room of his office at a creature of scales and fish-gills that writhed on eight legs with a head of vapor and eyes in the vapor that burned into his own.

He screamed and threw the sword at the thing...

Seven men were staring at Frank Stierman. He had no idea what had happened, but he knew he had lost all ground. In the middle of an impassioned plea for reason and patience, he had suddenly fallen back against a wall, screamed like a madman, and lost all tonus in his face. Whatever Frank Stierman had been a moment before, now he was unreliable...perhaps insane. Seven men stared back at him, their resolve now solidified not by anger and suspicion, but by the realization that they were dealing with a lunatic.

The connecting door to Stierman's private office opened, and a woman entered.

"Frank, can I see you for a moment?"

Stierman was trembling. The creature. That head, made of...of some kind of *vapor*...what was happening to him? "Not now, Monica. This is very important."

"I agree, Frank. *Important*. I have to speak to you *now*."

"Monica, I—"

"Frank, don't make me talk here, in front of these men!"

"You'd better go on, Frank. We want to talk about all this in private for a moment, anyhow."

"Yes. Go ahead, Stierman."

"It's all right. Go ahead and talk to her."

Oh my God, dear God, it's falling apart!

When the door was closed behind him, Stierman turned to his wife and said, "Why are you doing this to me? You know what's at stake in there."

"I'm getting out, Frank."

"Don't be a bitch!"

"I'm getting *out*. That's the bottom line, Frank. I was served today, by the Grand Jury..."

"Don't worry about a thing. I had structural engin—"

"Don't lie to me, Frank. I know you too well."

"I'm *not* lying."

"I'm going to help them, Frank. They said I wouldn't be held responsible. They know you got me to sign my name on the contracts as a dodge. I can't go through any more of this with you, Frank. After that southern thing, I thought—"

"My God, Monica, don't do this to me! Look, I'm begging you."

"Stop it, Frank."

"You're pregnant, you're going to have my child, how can you do

this to me?"

"That's the reason, Frank. Because I *am* pregnant, because I can't let a child come into the world with you for its father. I'm getting out. Now, Frank. I came down to tell you, so you wouldn't count on me when you talk to those men. Save yourself, Frank."

She turned to go. He reached across the desk and lifted the obsidian bookend and took three steps behind her. She turned just as he raised the weight. Her eyes were cool, waiting.

He slammed the bookend across her forehead.

She stumbled back, head jerking as though struck from three different directions. Her head opened and the white ash of bone was suddenly coated with blood. She flailed back, eyes glazing, and crashed into the dark window. Then the glass bowed, gave, and she was gone, silently, into the night.

Stierman dropped the bookend. His arms came up and his hands groped before him, shaking violently. He twitched with cold, a sudden cold that came from a place he could not name. Gone, she was gone, he was alone.

The words burned on the teakwood wall.

AH-WEGH THOGHA

He wanted to scream, but the trembling was on him, the insane twitching that he could not stop. His body was helpless in the spastic grip of the seizure. Gone, she was gone, they were in the next room, the building going down into the earth, those words, what were those words...

“Ah-wegh thogha!” His throat had never been formed to shape those words, but it did.

Dis woke.

He hungered for his body.

Time is a plaything for the gods. It only has substance for those who use it. Men fear time and bow to it. Gods cup it and mold it and use it. For a lark, they even waste it.

Time ceased its movement.

Dis called for his body.

From seven far lands they came with the stones. From deep within the earth two of them were brought, by creatures that did not walk. From Mecca, the worshippers defiled their own temple with theft, and brought it. From across the lost snow lands of Tibet they came with yet another. Seven great religions were gutted. Seven sources of power were lost. All in the moment without time.

Came, and brought with them the seven stones of power, the body of Dis.

To the skyscraper in Manhattan.

And Dis took back what had always been his.

Within the cornerstone, the black soul mote glowed and pulsed with the undying fire that lived within. The mote grew, and absorbed the cornerstone. It flowed black and strong, mighty and changing, absorbing the skyscraper as it had absorbed the bulk of Stonehenge.

The building shifted, shaped itself, and inside its growing body Frank Stierman knew a moment of madness before he was absorbed into the rock-flesh of Dis. His face, frozen in that moment of undying death, an eternity of broiling insanity through which he would gibber forever. The face of Mag, burned into the stone.

Dis came alive, and replaced his soul.

And rose, and darkness washed up again from the concrete covered earth that was his essence.

Above the city the bulk of Dis rose, spraddle-legged, enormous.

All this was rock. All this was flesh of his flesh. All this belonged to Dis, to be absorbed, to permit him to grow as he had never grown before.

To feed Dis.

Now men would know why the rock god had gone to sleep.

ERNEST AND THE MACHINE GOD

Gods in their Heaven, all's right with the world.

Selena: fighting desperately to keep her eyes open.

The road: North Carolina, like a snake, rock mountain wall to the left, sheer drop into nowhere on the right.

The night: black, dead and staring, like the eyes of a man lying on a kitchenette floor in a motel in Washington, D.C. Somewhere back there behind Selena.

The fear: that they could trace her, through his department, or through the woman who had rented them the motel room. And catch her. And put her in prison. And then kill her, for killing *him*.

The car: a 1951 Packard, sea-green, huge as a Tyrannosaurus, bought late the day before, for thirty-two dollars, all she had had in her purse (all she had been able to take off his body) from a street-corner used car lot in the filthy Negro section of Fredericksburg, Virginia.

The destination: Florida. Getaway. Hideaway.

Her eyes slid quickly guillotine closed. The uneven ratcheting of gravel under the front tires brought her sharply awake again. She pulled the car back onto the road. Over the edge, out through the right-side windows, she knew there was a sheer drop into the valley below. It was too deep and too black even to estimate the fall. Enough to kill a car, and its driver.

The road twisted back and around, heading up and up, always up and up. Fog slithered toothlessly across the road at every minor dip, and the center line had been dimmed to headlights many years before by wheels and weather. The lanes were one each way, and too narrow for a compact, much less the behemoth she spun through the turns. It smelled of vomit in the back seat. Thirty-two dollars. A dead man lying face-up on a linoleum floor, a corkscrew still in his hand.

There was no guard-railing or built-up shoulder over there on her right. It ended with frost-chipped road edge, thin rut of dirt, and the drop into the abyss. Her eyes closed slowly, flickering, drooping lids over dull film of sleep...

...and woke suddenly as the right front tire left the road, skimmed across the dirt, and rode in empty air...

...her eyes snapped open, and instinctively she wrenched the

wheel back hard left. The right front tire spun against the side of the edge, still clawing emptiness, but the Packard lurched left and forward as she hit the accelerator, and the tire chewed its way through loose topsoil and regained the road, the car now plunging hard left, suddenly rushing up the short incline at the base of the rock wall, tilting, and running along the side of the wall almost horizontally.

The car struck an outcropping with a monstrous clang, and Selena was thrown against the steering wheel, crushing her breasts against the ungiving circle. Sudden gray washed over her and she fell back, feet flopping off the pedals, arms limp at her sides. The car rebounded, suddenly stalled, and in the North Carolina night there was only silence...

...and the sound of a storm, far off in the mountains...

Nowhere is North Carolina. Nowhere is the land of fear. Nowhere is flight without destination, only a looming *back there*, where all flights begin.

Selena, in fog gray, lived it again...

Three years at Duke University had taught Selena all she needed to know: that college was a dead end for her. The degree of cunning she brought to her academic life was more than she needed to get a steady 3.2 average. It was tantamount to hunting a flea with an elephant gun. She had been fascinated briefly by some of the experimental studies done by Rhine and others in parapsychology labs, but even that had palled quickly; they were fools, tinkering with improbabilities. Selena doted on reality.

Reality for Selena took essential form in one word: *manipulation*.

Hidden deep in the entrails of that word was *its* power-source, the word: *power*.

There was an electrical fascination for her in getting people to do what she wanted them to do. Often it was to their advantage, occasionally not. But they were gambited, and that was the essence of the relationship. After which, Selena vanished in mist and memory.

She had been the most beautiful girl in Minneapolis. From high school on, she had always had her way. It became a constant, an accepted thing—she would date the most eligible boys, she would win the queenship of the senior prom, she would take first place honors on the debating team—and it became a way of life—they came to her to find out what the theme of the annual school fair should be, they came to her to find out if the new girl should be asked into the sorority, they came to her to be maneuvered, to have their decisions made for them—and it finally passed into the realm of an unnoticed

seventh sense. Selena could see and hear and smell and touch and taste and remember and...

Order people to her will. Almost unconsciously after her teens. She no longer had to work at it. They came to her and gave her what she wanted, and Selena took it as her due. And when she had left Minneapolis far behind her; when she had left Chicago behind her; when she had left New York behind her; then she no longer needed to ask people to do what she wanted them to do, to enter the regimented little ranks of her life, and march to the intricate route-step she had set for them.

College, and two brief marriages, and a modeling career, and boredom. Oh God, deadly boredom. The end result of getting whomever and whatever she wanted. Boredom...scintillant, murk-deep boredom, driving her to Washington, D.C. Where there were men who ordered entire nations to their will. In that city, she would find the ones who could compete with her on her own level.

But it had been the same for Selena. The same as it had been in Minneapolis, when she had challenged Teddy to climb through the old, broken culvert pipe, and he had done it, though shivering with fear; and a rusted nail protruding from a block of scrap wood had torn his thigh, and he had gotten lockjaw. But had done it. For her. The same as it had been at Duke, when she had seduced the assistant professor of psychology, to get the final term mark that would continue her scholarship, and he had done it, though cursing himself for his weakness; and he had been sacked the following year, when it had come to light, but that didn't matter to Selena for by then she had moved on. But he had done it. For her. The same as it had been in Chicago when she had befuddled the poor homosexual art director of a men's magazine, and gotten him to choose her for their centerfold thereby making three thousand dollars for her. What had happened to him had been unpleasant, but Selena never heard about it; she had moved on. It had been the same in New York. And in Washington, D.C. The same. Always the same. Selena always got her way, shivered with delight at making these movers & shakers move and shake to her designs.

Until she had met the man from the government department.

He had been stronger than she had expected. And he had not thought of it as a game. What Selena had not realized in time, was that *he* was a male counterpart of *her*. He was used to winning.

The contention had been a sheaf of papers, light-blue in color, that had come from a sealed file in his department. What each of them had wanted to do with those papers became unimportant the moment he stole them. Became *less* than unimportant in the motel, when the

showdown came, and each planned on winning. Selena had used all of her standard gambits—those that had worked on the best, and the worst. None of the gambits had any effect. But then, neither had his... on her. They had jousted with one another for an hour, in all the subtle, mysterious ways of the manipulators, and in the end he had come for her with the vicious corkscrew in his hand. The corkscrew he had used less than an hour before to open two bottles of a fine Medoc, only to discover both had gone sour; and then he'd twisted open the magnum of champagne.

She had struggled with him, and he had slipped in a smear of melted ice on the linoleum floor, and flailed backward, and smashed his head on the edge of the sink. At that particularly vulnerable juncture of neck and cranium; she had heard the ugly crack, like rotten wood, and he had slid sideways, onto his back, his eyes wide open and staring, the corkscrew in his hand. And she had rifled his body, taken all the money on him, and fled...

The veil of gray tore away like mist before a storm, and Selena felt her arms hanging straight down on either side of the steering wheel, terribly heavy. She tried to move, to lever herself back into an upright position, but her upper body was without muscular control, lying against the wheel. Her long auburn hair was over her face, and she could not open her eyes.

The sound of the storm was not in her head.

Outside the Packard the mountain night had opened; black rain, thick as lava, thundered down over the silent car. Her window was open. Rain was pattering off the sill, onto her left cheek. She tried to lurch farther to the left, and succeeded in getting her head to loll back and to the side.

Blessed cool wetness cascaded over her hot face, and she opened her eyes. Stringy moist strands of auburn hair hung across her face, and she moved her head idly, shaking them back with difficulty. Then she tried using her arms. They were limp from having been in that bloodless position for so long. But agonizingly...she drew her left hand up onto her lap. Her dress was soaked through, on the left side. The Pucci cocktail dress she had worn to aid her manipulation of the man from the government department. It was cold and flat against her side and her left breast. She wore no underwear.

Selena rolled her body back against the seat, and a surf-crash of sickness broke over her. She pulled the door handle and barely managed to swing the door out and up, realizing the car was tilted. The door was incredibly heavy. But she threw her weight against it, and fell from the car. The slamming door barely missed her legs.

The rain helped.

In a few moments she was able to stand, leaning against the side of the car. Her knees were filthy with road mud. The storm beat against her. Lightning exploded all around the mountains, chain-reacting like lunacy in a cyclotron. Thunder boomed *inside* the stones of the hills. Bursting outward on waves of muscularity that promised the ground beneath her would shatter in a moment.

Selena looked up into the rain, and it washed over her, plastering the thin silk cocktail dress to the lines of her body. In a short time, a time without duration, she was able to climb into the Packard again and start the engine. She backed it off the incline, and turned on the lights. They cast fitful light across the desolate Carolina nowhere. Rain slanted through the shafts.

She let the clutch out slowly and the car moved forward, as though testing itself: a wounded creature waiting to feel the sting of pain in one of its appendages.

She drove blindly, pain in her chest and the shivering chill of wet clothes against her flesh keeping her alert. The road went up and around, doubling back on itself as it threaded its way through softly-lit passages in the rain-choked darkness.

Somewhere along the way, she took a wrong turn.

In that night, any turn would have been a wrong turn.

It didn't matter until the Packard began chewing itself to pieces.

At first the sound was a soft *ting!* as of a paper clip hitting a revolving fan. She did not realize she was hearing it for some time, until the irregularity of its occurrence struck her. Selena's brow drew down, and she bit her lip. As if the machine had been waiting for this reaction from her, the *ting!*ing sharply changed to a harsh metallic clank that came again and again, then ceased for fifteen minutes till she was lulled that it had cured itself...and then clanked again.

By the time she reached the crest of the mountain, and saw the dim lights below, the noise had changed again: it was now the sound of metal chewing on metal, the sickly diseased sound of a creature eating itself alive.

She started down the twisting nightmare with the rain suddenly slackening its beat and then ceasing entirely as she threaded her way around fallen boulders lying in the oncoming lane.

Forty minutes later she passed the blurred and weatherbeaten sign that said **PETRIE**, pop. 650. It was decorated with Kiwanis and Moose emblems.

She drove down the last of the mountain slopes, and grinding hideously, pulled onto the main street of Petrie, North Carolina.

Five stores. Three on the left, two on the right. And beyond them,

thirty feet beyond, a gas station.

She rolled into the station. It was a brand of gasoline she did not know. There were three men lounging on straight-backed chairs, tilted up against the wall of the slatboard station, under a protective overhang. She pulled past the pumps, the Packard ratcheting and grinding, and stopped directly in front of them. She turned off the engine and stared out at them. They stared back, unmoving.

Selena got out of the car.

They still hung there, feet off the ground, chairs back against the wall, three men of indeterminate age, tanned and lined by life in the mountains. They were alive, she could ascertain that much, for two of them were chewing gum, and the third smoked a battered meerschaum, from which a curling filigree of silver-gray smoke regularly climbed into the suspiciously gentle night breeze. She was able to tell they were alive, additionally, by the looks of malicious lechery that invaded their faces. (In the mountains, far back in the hills of nowhere, the term “cool” had been invented, without having ever been named. These people were cool: they would not acknowledge their own unsettled reactions...to anything. Like mummies they would sit, until the world around them turned to ash, and the sky dripped fire, and then they would slowly turn to one another and nod. Coolly. But Selena, dress plastered to her ripe body, could draw reaction from a lizard, from a stone, from a gallon of sea water. They registered, and their eyes brightened. But cool. They did not speak.)

“I’m having some trouble with my car,” Selena said.

An unspoken chain of command was established, and the youngest of the three men—perhaps thirty-five—nudged himself forward, and the chair legs hit the wooden platform. “What seems to be the trouble?” he asked, bored.

“Something’s broken inside,” she said.

Slowly, almost languorously, the man slid out of the chair. Selena thought he might just settle in a pool of tired flesh, but he came toward her, hands thrust into the back pockets of his limp coveralls. “Like what?”

Selena’s hands went to her hips, and her jaw thrust out. “Friend, if I knew ‘like what,’ I wouldn’t be asking *you* to look at it, now would I?”

“You ain’t from ’round here,” he said, moving toward the car, chewing his gum furiously.

“No, I’m not.”

“Where y’from?”

“Are you going to take a look at this damned car or aren’t you?”

The gum-chewer seemed startled by her language. He stopped, looked dull. On the front porch of the station, the second man—fortyish, nearly bald, wearing a filthy coverall with the gas station emblem on the breast pocket—hit the boards with his feet. The scene had been turned over to him: the young one had come up against something he couldn't handle.

"Well, I c'n take a look at 'er," he said, and got up. The gum moved sluggishly in his mouth, and he matched pace with it toward Selena and the car.

He stood in front of the Packard for a moment, as if trying to decide which end contained the engine. Then he fumbled around the hood, looking for the latch. With exasperation, Selena moved beside him, reaching in through the front grille. "It opens from underneath."

The older man attained a tone of cool disdain that completely repudiated his obvious unfamiliarity with the business end of an automobile: "Why, thank you, ma'am." It was a brand of sarcasm honed to perfection by four hundred years of misdirecting the outsiders.

She opened the hood, and the man leaned over the front bumper, carefully not touching the mud-spattered metal with his already-filthy coverall. He stared down into the guts of the machine for long minutes.

Finally, without looking at Selena, he said, "Why don't y'all start 'er up."

Selena felt a rising tide of frustration and fury. She got in and turned the ignition key. The engine coughed to life. The sound of metal grinding and tearing came up solidly. Superimposed as the latest symptom of a disease that had been built in sixteen years before when the car had been new. It was a strange kind of testimony to the excellence of the Packard manufacturers that the car was even able to *start* sixteen years later; a feat far beyond the capabilities of contemporary Detroit Iron.

The gum-chewing went on apace, the staring into the innards did not change phase, the observers said nothing, the sound of thunder caromed through the mountains.

Selena leaned out through the open door. "Can you do anything...?"

The man slowly looked up at her. His expression was one of mixed lechery and disgust. He did not have to say *Lady, shut yore damned face, you're in awuh part of the woods now, with yore damned long legs and all yore damned pretty skin a-showin' through that skimpy li'l dress, an whut we want to do is whut we gonna do, so sit back an' don't be haranguin' us whilst we playin' with puttin' you in yore place*; he didn't

have to say it. There it was, arrogant and infuriating for Selena, in his expression.

The youngest of the three ambled up beside the gum chewer, and they stared down at the machine together.

Nowhere is North Carolina. Nowhere is the land of the Gods. All the Gods. Not only the ancient Gods who have gone to sleep, and the recent Gods who are still worshipped, but the God of Rain, and the God of Lightning, and the God of the Hunt, who have taken on new attributes and new faces. And the newest, youngest, strongest Gods: the God of Neon, the God of Smog, the God of Luck, and the Machine God. People come to worship at strange altars. They place their oblations at the feet of graven images without knowing these are truly Gods they have found. The War God grows fatter each year, gorged on blood. The Love God fornicates with himself, weakening his genes, rebirthing as a thalidomide monstrosity. Paingod does his work and doles out his anguish, paying no attention to the cries of those crushed beneath his millstones. But the Machine God...

The sound had grown more violent. It was an ugly sound. In final frustration, Selena shut the car down, and got out. The tableau was still the same. The little porch on the slat-walled gas station; the old man still tilted against the front wall, smoking his pipe; the two observers still looking down into the engine as though studying a slide under a microscope; the mountains looming huge and dark around the town; the sound of the storm gathering strength to hurl itself against them once more.

“All *right!*” Selena snapped. “Enough is enough.”

The two looked at her. Then as one, they looked at the old man in the chair. And Selena realized all at once, that neither of these two fools could have done anything, had they *wanted* to: the old man was the mechanic. The other two were camouflage, the sportsmen who had been given Selena to toy with for a few minutes. It was the old man she should have approached.

He did not move an inch from his comfortable position as he informed her in a doughy, wheezing voice, “Can’t he’p you, ma’am. Trouble you got’s too big. Have t’take it on in to Shelby, or someplace, where they’s ’quipped to make them kinda repairs.”

“But you didn’t even *look* at it!” Selena yelled.

“Too much. Can’t fix ’er,” the old man said, and closed his eyes. Smoke rose from the meerschaum once more, lazily.

The two fools stood where they were, staring once again down into the engine, as if hoping the show might resume. Selena shoved them aside and slammed the hood closed. She was speechless with fury. She strode back to the front door and started to get in. And realized...she could not go *anywhere*.

She needed this car in working order.

If they were tracking her, she could not afford to be without transportation.

But these fools would not—or could not—repair the engine.

She was hamstrung.

A wave of such helplessness possessed her that she almost sank down on the car seat.

The old man, without opening his eyes, said, “I s’pose you could call old Ernest...”

And the two fools fell down laughing. The youngest one rolled around on the muddy ground as though possessed by St. Vitus’s Dance. The middle-aged one barked a kind of laughter Selena had not heard since she had been at the Bronx Zoo. The old man was smiling, smugly.

“Who the hell is Ernest? And what’s so funny?”

The old man opened his eyes, and looked at the middle-aged one. His laughter came under control with difficulty, but when he could speak without gasping, he wiped the tears from his eyes and said, with difficulty, “Ernest? Oh, he, uh, he r’pairs things, sometimes...”

And they fell down laughing again.

Selena watched them with incredulity. *Something* was funny, unquestionably. But *what* that something was she could not even begin to fathom. The two grown men tumbled back and forth at her feet like an unmatched set of children’s toys, loose-jointed, rubber-armed, totally without control of themselves as the *enormity* of the joke paralyzed them. Their laughter drowned out the thunder that whipped overhead.

She had to repeat herself three times before they could hear her: “Well, all right then, why don’t you just run and get ‘old Ernest!’”

The youngest one sat up, suddenly. There on the ground. He looked at her. She was serious. *Why the hell* shouldn’t *I be serious*, Selena thought, interpreting his look in an instant. The young one looked over at the old one. The old one nodded with a barely perceptible movement of his head. The young one leaped to his feet and, cackling uproariously, dashed off through the town, and was gone in an instant. Selena stood beside the Packard, tapping her foot. Every few seconds, the middle-aged one, now back in his chair on the porch beside the old man, would chuckle deep in his throat, and build

it till he was roaring with laughter. *Fuck you!* thought Selena.

...Ah, He is a special God. He loves his gears and his pumps, his springs and his transistors, his printed circuits and his boilers. He is not a jealous God, like some, but he is an attentive God. He tends to business, and keeps his world of machines functioning. But every now and then, every once in a while, every few centuries in a mind that is Machine and not Man, the Machine God finds one He can care about more than the others. A special machine, or a special man, and they become the beloved of the Machine God. Saint Joan had the power of moving masses of men to religious fervor. Ahmad, who was Mohammed, was able to die of his own volition when he was presented with the keys of eternal life on earth, and those of Paradise. Gandhi saw the sheep being led to the slaughter and worship of Kali, and rejected her tenets, turning to the wisdom of the Gautama Buddha, drawing unto himself the powers of peace. Christ was able to heal the lepers, to walk on water. Samson brought down the temple, and David slew Goliath, and Jonah lived in the belly of the whale. And for the Machine God, the beloved child was...

Loping down the street, the gum-chewing fool leaped high in the air, like a lovesick schoolboy who has grabbed his first thigh in the schoolyard at recess. He came tumbling, gibbering, capering, laughing up to the station, and pointed back in the direction he had come. He broke up completely, slumping down against the porch-post. The other two men laughed with him. Selena looked in the direction their laughter was fleeing.

He was perhaps six feet tall, incredibly thin, with arms that might have been figs. 87 & 88 in a medical text on rickets. He was the compleat Ichabod Crane. His hands hung six inches below the cuffs of his no-color jacket, his knobbed ankles were exposed between the tattered legs of his pants and his highly-polished cordovan shoes. He moved in a long, disjointed manner, more like some whisper-articulated insect, a mantis or a spider, than a man. His hair was lank and as colorless as his clothing: the color of sand, the color of bricks, the color of rain, the color of teak, but none of these: all of them, with the highlights leached out. Mudpie hair. His face was all angles and planes, eyes big and a little vacant. Mouth as wide as a dog's. He stumbled and stepped, a coordinated spastic, a colt learning its legs.

Selena stared at the apparition, and realized what the joke was.

Ernest was the joke. His totality...his look, his manner, his walk, his *presence*...was a joke. The three men on the porch had extended the scope of their sport. They had brought her a half-wit to repair the car. The viciousness of it did not escape her.

Ernest came to her, and stopped.

She looked up into his eyes.

He was by no means a half-wit.

There was something living behind those eyes, and from silt-deep in her memory came a quote from Gerald Kersh that fit precisely:... *there are men whom one hates until a certain moment when one sees, through a chink in their armour, the writhing of something nailed down and in torment.*

He stared at her, and she was beautiful. More beautiful than she had ever been before. For the first time in her life, Selena was uncomplicated. Light bathed her. She felt her flow and her pulse. The boy stared at her. He was no more than sixteen years old, possibly seventeen, but he saw her as she was, reduced to her essentials.

“Can you fix my car?”

He did not reply.

“There’s something wrong with it. Can you repair it?”

Shyly, he nodded yes. And the three fools fell down laughing at him.

Then, oh so strange...

Ernest started at the rear of the Packard. His long, delicate, pale fingers barely touched the metal. They grazed the green rusted hide of the ailing creature, and traced four thin lines from the rear fender forward, as he walked to the front of the machine. The light touch of *someone getting to know someone*. He stood in front of the car for a minute (while the fools roared and beat each other on the back), head cocked to one side, the hair hanging down over his right eye; listening. Then he touched the grille.

When Selena had angrily opened the hood for the gum-chewer, it had sprung up just as angrily on its counterbalanced springs, clanging fully open and quivering.

The grille opened smoothly now. Smoothly, slowly, as though exposing its interior to the gentle ministrations of a physician with the power of mist and cool.

Then Ernest laid his hands on the engine.

He touched it.

He touched it all over.

He pressed it. Sensuously. Charmingly.

As they watched, his hands caressed the engine.

Lightly.

He leaned in, and listened to the machine silently.

He talked to the machine. Silently.

Then he reached far up under the engine, where there was only darkness, and he moved his fingers delicately.

Selena watched, amazed. It was lunacy, of course, but the way he moved, the sureness and coordination in his hands. It was the joy of watching a good shoemaker at his last, the pleasure of watching a skilled cabinetmaker rabbet-joining two perfectly planed surfaces, the exquisite wonder of a sculptor forming grandeur from base rock; *he talked to the machine.*

After a while, he brought his hands back up into sight, and they held a twisted twig of metal, brightly smeared down one side where its surface had been scored and abraded.

"Fell down into the engine," he said.

His voice was a small child's voice; the voice of a boy not yet a man, who seldom spoke.

"Can you repair it?" Selena demanded...gently.

He nodded.

The three fools were giggling now, holding their sides from the pain. Ernest went past them into the gas station. In a moment he came out with a plain black wire coat-hanger. He took a pair of wire-snips from a heavily laden workbench just inside the door of the garage, and snipped off a straight piece nine inches long. He laid the wire-snips where he had found them, returned the useless coat-hanger to the station, and came back to the car.

He took the nine-inch piece of coat-hanger in his left hand, and with his right he began to bend it.

He should not have been able to bend it so intricately, over such a short span, but Selena watched with growing wonder as he did precisely that. The final shape was something unlike a helix, and something unlike a Möbius, and something unlike a button-hook. It was something else.

Then he reached down, back into nowhere, where he had been, and he did things *inside* the engine. When his hands emerged, the metal had been left inside. There was grease on his hands, and none on his jacket.

"Well?" Selena demanded. Gently.

Ernest nodded toward the car, and she knew he wanted her to start it up. She got in, turned the key, and listened to the instant surge of thrumming power that coursed through the Packard. It sounded strong, potent, impressive. The sound not even a new car makes.

She turned it off, and got out. She had two dollars in change in her purse. She offered it to him, but he shyly smiled, a childlike grin of

embarrassment, and thanked her no ma'am thank you very much. Then he bobbed back down the street, and was gone.

Selena stood there with the silver in her hand; she wore an empty, startled expression of *what happened*.

The three fools were now prostrate, clutching one another for support even on the ground.

"All right, you three incompetents!" she snapped.

They stopped laughing instantly.

"Ernest fix y'up real good, Ma'am?" the youngest asked, snickering.

"He did a hell of a lot more than any of you idiots!"

The old one stared at her smoothly. He wasn't laughing now. "Guess you'll be movin' on now, that right?"

Selena was not moving on.

"Where can I stay overnight in this cemetery? There's a storm brewing and I'm not going on till I find someone in this idiot town who can give me a straight answer how to get back on the main road. If I take directions from any one of you, I'm liable to wind up in Nome, Alaska."

The old one looked at her.

The other two looked at each other.

One of them bit his lip.

One of them coughed into his sleeve.

One of them licked his lips, hoping.

She went to the boarding house. Her room was on the first floor, in the rear. It was cold, and it smelled of mildew. She undressed in the dark and used the bath down the hall. Then she came back and started to get into bed. As she pulled back the thin blanket, she felt him staring at her. She turned toward the window, and for a moment she thought it might be the youngest of the three fools, and she made an instinctive movement to cover herself with the blanket. But the feeling passed, and she knew it was him: that Ernest.

Dark in the night, wrapped in rain, silent staring, tensed and trembling, molded into shadow, as the storm broke in fragments of sound and light that formed a pattern of violence only hinted at by the earlier holocaust. Jagged scythes of lightning ripped away the darkness and blasted the earth. A tongue of flame from a thunder dragon crushed, seared, and vaporized a tree stump. In the darkness he did not move. Flame lived beside him as the stump returned to its component parts. Rain made a second face on him, filling his eyes and draining down through his hair into his waiting mouth. Wide-eyed and wondrous, he saw her there in the window, only faintly seen through the deepest shadow.

Selena lived to manipulate.

Nowhere is the desolate countryside of the amoralist soul. The twisted, blasted, blackened wreckage littering a landscape of lava pits and brine holes and quicklime pools. Selena, naked, pulse throbbing in her wrist, muscle quivering on the fleshy inner surface of her thigh, smelling sweetly of sudden woman sweat, found her great gambit.

Out there, she thought. This child who has never been with a woman, who has never sunk himself hard into the body of a woman like me. Whatever he is, magician, maniac, wild psi talent, elf gnome troll leprechaun, whatever he is, there's one thing he's not. Yet. Gambit. Point counterpoint. What would it be like to do it with someone like him? I thought at first he was an idiot, a retarded thing. But he isn't. He has a power. And I have a power. Let him feed me that power through the soft place.

In the darkness, Ernest watched her come to the window, her white flesh shining out at him, as she opened the window, raising it, cutting off the vision at the breasts. Then she stepped over the sill, into the thundering rain, and down in the running Carolina mud, and she came to him, standing beside the smoking burning stump that had been blasted by a God.

He could not move. He held animal still as she moved up to him and the rain washed her body with streaks of topaz, like the lines on a blueprint, and yellow ochre. Her body, a naked woman's body, a miracle in brightness. His belly heaved as he fought for air. Electricity surged and pulsed in the night.

Then she undressed him, carefully, slowly, with subterfuge and stealth, and laid his naked white smooth body down in the mud, and she became more a woman as he became a man for the first time.

She led him the way, guiding him, her own special way, the way only special certain women have that way; it was not the way he could have found with a local town girl; but then, like everyone in the town, they laughed at him.

She did not laugh at him.

Not at first.

No God is sane. How could it be? To be a Man is so much less taxing, and most men are mad. Consider the God. How much more deranged the Gods must be, merely to exist. There can be no doubt: consider the Universe and the patterns without reason upon which it is run. God is mad. The God of Music is mad. The Timegod is punctual, but *he* is mad. And the Machine God is mad. He has made the bomb and the pill and the missile and the acid and the electric chair and the laser and the embalming fluid and

the thalidomide baby in his own image. For the lunatic Gods there are minuscule pleasures. The beloved of the Gods are the best, the most highly treasured, the most zealously guarded. God is brutal, God is mad, God is vengeful. But all Gods revere innocence. The lamb, the child, the song. To steal these, is to steal from the mad Gods...

Daylight came like a drunk climbing down off a week's binge. Colorless, nervous, tremblingly, wan and wasted.

In front of the gas station, the old one sat silently, flaking out the grime from beneath his fingernails with the plastic edge of a gas credit card someone had driven off and left behind.

Water ran in gullies through the center of Petrie, North Carolina, and returned somewhere to the land to rise and wait to fall again another time.

When the old man saw Ernest walking through town, he sat forward on his chair, his mouth a little open, and he could not believe. The boy walked like you or me. Gone was the loose-jointedness at which everyone laughed.

Gone was the slack mouth at which everyone laughed.

Gone was the wild look in the eye at which everyone laughed.

Gone was the adolescent silliness at which everyone laughed.

Gone was the power.

Later that day, when she did not answer the furious pounding on the door of the boarding house, they sent the youngest of the three who hung out at the gas station around by the window. He found it open. He stared inside, and started to run back inside to tell them, but he licked his lips, knowing he had lost his chance, and climbed up into the room, and touched her body for a few moments before unbolting the door.

Dried Carolina mud covered her body, as though she had been rolling sensuously in it when it had been soft and wet. There was blood on the inside of her thighs, but that wasn't what had killed her.

They could not tell what had killed her.

She did not look peaceful, as if she had died in her sleep; Selena had died reluctantly, fighting every squeeze of the way. She did not look peaceful.

There was not a mark on her.

But one of the crowd lounging in and out of the room said it; he didn't know he'd said it, but he did: he said, "Looks like somethin'

stopped her pump.”

The Packard ran so well, so beautifully, they could not bear to junk it. So they kept it, and for years thereafter it ran without the slightest difficulty. It ran and ran, and gave generous gas mileage.

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